THE TREASURE NETS

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HODDER & STOUGHTON

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NOVELS BY

GERARD FAIRLIE

The Treasure Nets
Mr. Malcolm Presents
The Rope Which Hangs
Birds of Prey
Shot in the Dark
Unfair Lady
Scissors Cut Paper
Stone Blunts Scissors
The Man Who Laughed
The Exquisite Lady
The Muster of the Vultures
Suspect
The Man With Talent

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
Ltd., London

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LONDON
HODDER & STOUGHTON, LIMITED
MCMXXXIII

The characters in this book are entirely imaginary, and have no relation to any living person.

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
FOR HODDER AND STOUGHTON LIMITED
BY JARROLD AND SONS LTD. NORWICH

THE TREASURE NETS

THE tail of one racing cloud, hotly pursued by the tip of another, yet managed to keep sufficient distance to enable the gentle rays of the moon for a few moments only to enlighten the scene. For these few seconds the foam coming from the little waves which beat in puny impudence against the shingle of the shore, in feeble imitation of their parents, the giant rollers, outside the little breakwater which were doing their utmost to demolish this man-made protection against the fury of the storm, glistened strangely white against the dark background of the angry ocean.

And in that moment the two watching men standing on the shingle just out of reach of the waves caught a glimpse of a boat rounding the end of the breakwater and achieving the comparative shelter of the small harbour from the racing currents outside. Then the pursuing cloud reached the face of the moon and overshadowed the cold rays, depriving the watchers of their view and casting the night back into its inky blackness.

But the watchers had seen enough. The two men who were standing there clad in oilskins, walked across the shingle to the very edge of the seashore and stood there waiting,

ready to answer the hail which they knew was coming shortly and to help in landing the passenger whom they were expecting. It was not long in coming. Across the waters of that little harbour the boat, a fishing-trawler, made good progress, and a gentle hail came from the darkness in front of them, a hail which was quickly answered by one of the two men. A few moments more they watched; and then they heard the keel of the boat strike against the shingle. Almost immediately something hit the ground close to where they stood, and flashing a torch around one of the men soon perceived that for which he was seeking. A rope had been thrown from the boat: picking up the end the man quickly drew in the slack, aided by his companion.

It was not long before the trawler was firmly secured and the crew and passenger had waded through the shallow water to the land. One man only was left in charge; the rest—no words spoken except a low greeting—turned and made inland with one accord towards the only light which was shining in that lonely little village. It took them but a few minutes to reach their destination; indeed, it could scarcely have taken them more, for the cottages straggled on each side of the one and only street which led directly from the tiny harbour at the one end to the inn at the other.

From end to end was but about a furlong, and the comparatively imposing appearance of the inn which the little party reached would have appeared to a stranger to have been out of keeping with the rest of the village. Built of grey stone over which ivy and creepers clambered at their will, it stretched for a goodly distance along the road, occupying, indeed, as much ground as would have done at least five of the cottages. A great oak door of enormous thickness, built in days when man relied entirely on such thickness for protection, was surmounted by a hanging lantern, whose rosy glimmer acted as its beacon. Tiny latticed casements, which a hundred years or so ago had been set flat within the stonework, were now thrown back into great open bays ; upon the ground floor only, within the tiny bedrooms with their sloping roofs, the windows were set flat as of old. The sills before them boasted each its window-box, in which, during the day, a medley of flowering plants lessened the severity of the seventeenth-century stone. It was a picturesque old inn, breathing an atmosphere of a vastly different age, an atmosphere which none of the necessary changes carried on within had as yet been rash enough to spoil.

It was before the heavy oak door that the little party stopped, and even as they did so

this was flung open and light from a dozen candles fell slantingly upon the red-paved steps. Within, peering out into the night with light-bedazzled eyes, stood a sturdy, well-built man, inclining indeed to stoutness, upon whose empurpled face the love of good living had exacted its toll. There was about his whole demeanour the unmistakable touch of proprietorship which proclaimed his status as keeper of that inn.

He bowed low to the leader of the little band, and with a deferential greeting stood aside for him to enter. Then, without in any way extending this deference to the others of the party, he followed his guest into a long, oak-panelled room to the left of the great front door, and watched him seat himself in an easy-chair within reach of the table. With steps remarkably light and quick for a man of his size, the innkeeper moved at once to the bar at the farther end of the room, and within a moment or so, without a word having been uttered on either side, a large whisky and soda and a plate of inviting-looking sandwiches lay upon the table beside the new arrival.

With a slight nod of acknowledgment the latter took a long drink and then started at once to dismiss a sandwich. As he did so, his eyes, small and hard, glanced first at the innkeeper, who was standing a few paces away

somewhat uneasily watching his every movement, and then around the room in which were now gathered the men with whom he had come. Clothed in the black jerseys and loose trousers of fishermen, there was yet about each and all, something—a certain touch of sophistication perhaps—which was strangely at variance with their evident trade. In the bearing of each there was a subtle lack of that free-and-easy carriage, the unrestricted movements of the genuine fisherman, while in their features, in the eyes, restless and keenly intelligent, which stared back at their leader, there was no hint of that bucolic complacency which an open-air occupation so often imparts.

For that he was their leader there was little doubt. Insignificant in stature, unremarkable in appearance, there was yet about the little man seated at the table a distinction, an assurance of power which stamped him unmistakably as belonging to the small coterie of those who give the orders; while, from the hardness of his small bright eyes, the thin line of the narrow mouth, the obstinate curve of his chin, there was small doubt also that, the orders once given, it would go ill with those who dared to disobey.

A heavy silence hung about the room, a silence as of suspense, but the little man appeared in no wise anxious to break it; that

no one else would be bold enough to do so was abundantly clear. His eyes flitted restlessly from one to another of the men grouped around, and fell once more upon the innkeeper. Then, finishing the drink in his glass, he slowly munched the remainder of his sandwich, and, with a sudden movement, pushed his chair back from the table. Turning once more to the innkeeper, he spoke suddenly in a voice quick, abrupt and entirely commanding.

"Well," he said, "has she changed her plans?"

"No, sir. She arrives to-morrow morning."

"To-morrow morning!" The man spoke sharply. "How? By train?"

"No, sir."

The innkeeper produced an envelope from his pocket.

"This is the letter I received, sir."

It was noticeable that whereas in his attitude to the others present, those who were residents of the village, the innkeeper was almost autocratic, in his relations with this new-comer he was definitely obsequious, almost too polite. The latter took the note from him, extracted it from the envelope and read it. As he returned it he looked up.

"I see," he said. "Staying with friends the night—motoring on to-morrow—will arrive here for lunch. To view the estate, no doubt."

A faint smile smirked around his lips, but it did not in any way soften his features.

" Well, let's hope she likes her inheritance. Have you ever seen this young lady ? "

" No, sir, never."

" I understand she is a butterfly of Society," said the man, musingly. " A lady of beauty." He paused a moment. " Yes," thoughtfully, " a lady of beauty."

He looked up.

" Business," he said, " before pleasure—that is understood ? "

The men shuffled uneasily. There was a chorus of assent.

" It will be dangerous . . ." said their leader slowly, his piercing eyes seeming to pick up the glance of each man in that room, to bore unmercifully into even his most inmost thoughts. " It will be dangerous," he repeated, " for anyone to admire the beauty and grace of the young lady who owns this estate."

No one said a word, and the speaker allowed a suitable interval to elapse before his next words.

" It will also be dangerous," he said, " for anyone to show any pleasure in her company. Precisely what I mean by that is this . . . no one is to be pleased to see her when she walks about the street . . . no one is to raise his cap . . . no one, in fact, is to salute her in

any way. Conversation occasionally will be inevitable, but she is not to be answered lightly, and the words that pass must be as few as possible. If she talks to any of you, you will answer if you must ; if you can—pass on without replying. She is to be made as uncomfortable as possible. Is that quite clear ? "

Once again the chorus of assent from the rough voices of those around answered his question. It was evidently clear . . . very clear.

" This young lady," he continued, after a moment, " has arrived amongst us most inopportunely. It is a pity that her aunt has died. She was a good landlady to us. She hated the place, I think, as much as we should have disliked a visit from her—which all worked very well. This young lady, on obtaining her inheritance, is bursting in upon us, and as soon as she feels as great a dislike as possible . . . the better. Let it be as great as was that of the previous owner of this place from whom she inherited it. Our object is either to make her sell—we will pay a good price "—he laughed—" or else to copy the the conduct of the late lamented aunt."

He rose to his feet.

" We will try the usual methods first. You will all be impertinent . . . you will all be boorish . . . you will all be "—he laughed

again—" very much the Socialist. You must make her feel uncomfortable, unhappy . . . you must make her feel that she has made a great mistake in coming to this place . . . that she is not wanted . . . that she had better get away. No favour shall you show her. No flowers to greet her as she steps from her car. All right . . . that will do."

The men, one by one, left the room. As the last was about to leave the little man called to him.

" Bill," he said, " get the boat ready. I shall be leaving in about ten minutes—and remember, same time to-morrow night."

" Yes, sir."

As soon as the door had closed behind this man the leader turned to the innkeeper.

" The usual methods, I think I said," he remarked quietly, once again that faint, humourless smile playing about his lips.

The innkeeper, greatly daring, also grinned.

" I quite understand," he said.

His eyes became thoughtful, his smile became broader: it was noticeable that he omitted the customary " sir," but if this fact was remarked by the other it was overlooked.

" All is here ? " he asked.

" I have everything ready," said the innkeeper.

For a moment there was silence, and in that

interval the other drained his glass and then turned once more to the innkeeper.

" I trust," he said, " that the young lady will be sensible If not we shall have to try more vigorous methods. But I have seen her photograph. I have once been privileged to see her from a distance. I am an admirer of beauty. I should dislike to hurt one hair of her fair head."

This time he laughed outright, but it was not a pleasant laugh ; it did not convey to its hearer what the sound of mirth should convey.

Without another word he strode from the room and quickly made his way back to the shingle of the beach. Wading through the water, without even a good night salutation to the few men standing around, he entered the boat, which lost no time in setting forth once more seawards.

In a few moments it had disappeared into the blackness of the night.

THE TREASURE NETS CHAPTER II

THERE was a smile of pleased anticipation in the blue eyes of Shirley Grange when they first caught sight of the little grey village nestling so close to the tiny harbour of that rugged Devon coast. Very pretty it looked

with its backing of blue sea and towering cliff, sunshine falling in jagged radiance upon the stone of its handful of cottages and lending these a whiteness which was almost blinding. And as she stared down at it from the narrow cliff road which her car was fast descending, not for the first time did the girl wonder why it was that her aunt, usually so content with all things, had taken such a fixed dislike to this little hamlet, which was known as Freeth. Sinister, she had called it, and Shirley laughed aloud at the thought, for anything less sinister than the smiling village she was fast approaching the girl could not conceive.

She had reached the bottom of the cliff now, and with a slackening of speed she turned the car down a rough path running directly towards that cluster of cottages glistening in the sun, and forming eventually the one and only street. And then she caught sight of the inn, and a thrill of delight made Shirley's heart beat a little faster. For this inn was so definitely all that a village inn should be: so exceeding any hopes that she might have entertained as to the possible desirability of her recent inheritance. The tiny latticed casements, with their boxes of gaily-hued flowers; the great oak door with its ponderous hanging lantern; the quaint old sign, painted surely over a hundred years ago, for

in the vague outlines of its picture and the even vaguer lettering beneath, no one in ignorance could ever have deciphered that for name it was known as the " Olde Shippe " : all these things her eager eyes appraised, and it was with a smiling face that, bringing the car to rest before its door, the girl jumped lightly to the ground and started to walk quickly up the steps into the wide hall of the inn.

Here she was met by the innkeeper. But there was no answering smile in the keen eyes that met her own, no trace of welcome in the casual bow with which her greeting was acknowledged. Shirley, however, was far too happy, far too engrossed in becoming acquainted with her new possession to lend much notice to the coolness of his manner. Her eyes danced excitedly from object to object, noting with approval the panelled walls, the valuable old prints upon them and the total absence of any jarring modernity to destroy that atmosphere of age which clung so fittingly to this remnant of the past.

" What a delightful place," she said. " I never hoped for anything so perfect—so utterly unspoilt."

As she spoke the girl wandered slowly down the hall into the long room upon the left. A table was set for lunch, and she glanced with

pleasure at the dainty white cloth and the bowl of roses which adorned it.

" How very inviting it all looks," she said, and turned impulsively to the man by her side. " I've never seen any inn so well-kept before . . . especially in a lonely village."

She smiled at him : that smile which very few people had ever been able to resist. It started in the depths of her deep blue eyes and spread rapidly to the proud little mouth, until the dimples jumped to life on either cheek. A charming smile with an infectious quality which rarely failed in effect, but for once its magic was entirely wasted. For very stiffly, very formally the innkeeper bowed again, and when he spoke his voice was hard.

" I'm glad you approve of my services, Miss Grange," he said ; and then, before she could answer, he added quickly : " You would like your lunch at once, I expect. I will attend to it."

Turning on his heel he walked swiftly from the room.

The girl felt rebuffed. There had been no churlishness in the man's reply, and yet, in some indefinable way, it had filled her with resentment. She stared around her musingly, and now a shadow seemed to have fallen into the room, the sunshine was less bright, the day less inspiriting. In spite of herself, Shirley felt depressed.

Half an hour later, however, after an excellent lunch, well cooked and served, her spirits had returned, and when, accompanied by the still unbending innkeeper, she had made a thorough tour of the building, a little of her morning's excitement revived in her again. For the whole place was enchanting ; each of the bedrooms, gay with freshly-laundered chintz, had in every way come up to the promise of those downstairs rooms. The inn was indeed well cared for : an inheritance of which any girl might well be proud.

But Shirley Grange was puzzled, for, this being the case, why was it that so few travellers ever cared to take advantage of the comforts offered ? An examination of the books soon had convinced her that those beds were rarely slept in, and, even then, never for more than a single night at a time. The inn might be perfect of its kind, but as a money-making proposition it failed entirely : once the amount of wages for those few employed within the place was deducted from the total takings there was very little left—a curious fact, which, in these days of motor traffic its lonely position did not quite justify.

However, when she questioned him about it the innkeeper merely nodded his head resignedly.

" It's a very strange thing, Miss Grange,"

he said, and his hard little eyes watched her intently. " A very strange thing, but people never seem to care to spend more than one night in the place. And they never seem to recommend it—though I'm sure I do everything I can to make them comfortable."

He paused and Shirley smiled at him reassuringly, but there was no spontaneous friendliness in her smile now. This rotund man, with his cold formality which bordered so nearly on the verge of insolence itself, had repelled her greatly.

" Whatever the fault is," she said generously, " I'm quite convinced that it doesn't lie with you, Mr. Macrae. But why is it ? What possible reason have people for disliking the place ? My aunt, too, only spent one week-end here, and that was enough for her."

" Some people say that it's haunted," said the man slowly. " Ridiculous, of course. I've never seen anything myself, or heard anything either ; but—well, it's a very old place and there's some story about it having belonged to a renegade monk, long before it was converted into an inn, and I have heard that the Black Mass used to be said in this very room."

The total lack of any emotion or hint of superstition in the cool, level tones of the innkeeper's voice lent to his tale an air of

conviction and probability which the girl did not fail to sense. During the last hour a change had come over the day: the brightness had vanished from the sky and it almost seemed as though before long rain would begin to fall, for already dark clouds were chasing away the blue. And into the long, oak-panelled room shadows had fallen, giving it an air of gloom which added credence to this tale of ancient horrors. Under the intent eye of the watching man Shirley Grange remained unmoved, but inwardly, in spite of herself, she shivered.

"Well, I think I'll just take a turn round the village before it rains," she said, and moved quickly to the door, but there she stopped and turned. "You might prepare a room for me," she added quickly. "I've decided to stay the night."

She was gone on the instant before the other could reply, which was perhaps fortunate, for an ugly scowl had darkened his face and his eyes gleamed evilly.

But of this Shirley was happily unaware, and it was with a slight return of her former light-heartedness that she started to walk briskly down the narrow little street towards the tiny harbour with its handful of fishing-boats drawn up on the beach. As she did so she glanced curiously at the cottages on either side, noting their extraordinary austerity:

no curtains were drawn about the latticed windows, no flowers bloomed in the gardens, and, with a sudden quickening of her breath, the girl realised the significance of this plainness. For although while she had driven through the village a little while before she had seen no one, now every two yards she encountered a man, lounging in his cottage doorway, mending a fishing-net, perhaps, or just idly smoking his pipe ; but nowhere had she seen a woman, not once had she heard the care-free gaiety of the laughter of children. Were there no women in the place ? The thing was not feasible ; and yet, there seemed to be a lot about the little hamlet of Freeth which was not at all feasible. With an unaccountable sinking of the heart, the girl wandered down to the beach.

A number of fishing-nets were spread over the shingle, and near them stood four or five young men who were regarding her approach with a silent watchfulness which she found a little unnerving. She nodded to them cheerfully, however, but although they still continued to stare, some even with a hint of grudging admiration in their furtive-looking eyes, no answering nod or word of greeting came from the little group, and it was with surprised indignation that Shirley realised that one and all were hostile to her coming.

Why on earth should they be? What possible grounds had they for any such resentment? Fuming inwardly, but with a serene smile curving her lips, she braced herself to walk unconcernedly past them and saunter casually towards the tiny harbour which lay beyond. But all the while she felt their eyes, curious and unfriendly, still intent upon her, and it was with a distinct effort that, stopping before a man who was leaning negligently upon the side of a boat staring at her thoughtfully, Shirley forced herself to speak.

"It looks as though we're going to have rain," she said. "Do you think there'll be a storm?"

Never moving from his sprawling attitude upon the boat, nor making the slightest attempt to remove his cap, the man shook his head.

"Shouldn't think so," he muttered, and the total lack of courtesy in his voice did not inspire the girl to pursue the conversation.

Some spots of rain had fallen, and turning her back upon the harbour she started to retrace her steps towards the inn. To do this, however, she must face again that battery of hostile glances, and at the thought her heart sank miserably. But her head was held high and her lips set proudly as she approached the little group once more; and this time their lack

of friendliness was even more apparent, for as she passed she saw one man whisper to another and an evil smile flashed over both their faces. She had walked but a yard or so away when a laugh, jeering and cruel, came mockingly to her ears.

With steps which pride impelled her not to hasten, the girl returned slowly to the inn, an angry flush mounting to her cheeks, her eyes flashing with indignation. No wonder her aunt had never liked the place! Such a village of churlish boors it had never before been her misfortune to visit, and very deeply did she regret that impulse which had bidden her inform the innkeeper that she would stay the night. True, she could tell him she had now decided otherwise, but a mutinous trait in her character made the girl very much dislike the thought of proving to those unmannerly rustics that she had been driven from the place. No—she would brave it out now that her room was engaged, but there was no smile upon her face as she mounted again those red-paved steps which led to the door of the inn.

Many times in the hours that followed did Shirley Grange curse that stubborn pride which had impelled her to remain in this dreary spot for the whole of the afternoon and night. Rain pattered desolately against the window-panes, and in the inn itself there were

very few resources to occupy her mind. Thus it was that after a lonely dinner, which had proved to be just as excellently cooked as had been her lunch, the girl decided to shorten the evening appreciably by retiring at once to bed.

Nine o'clock had barely struck when she blew out the flickering candles and composed herself for sleep. And for a few hours she slept dreamlessly, only to be awakened, however, by the noisy striking of a clock somewhere in the inn. Mechanically she counted out the strokes, and those of another clock which had now commenced to strike, and she realised that it was midnight. And at the thought a chill crept over her ; the room was very dark, sinister shadows lurked in every corner, and into her mind came flooding memories of all that she had heard and read regarding the Black Mass, and all the horrors of Satanic worship. Angry with herself for thus indulging in such morbid superstition, Shirley tried to force the thoughts away, to sink once more into a dreamless slumber. But now sleep refused to come : she felt entirely refreshed, quite wide-awake, and for perhaps an hour she lay listening to the rain falling steadily against the latticed windows. At last its monotonous patter was just beginning to lull her into a doze when a sudden sound jolted her quickly into alert wakefulness. Her heart

beat hard, for outside, beneath her window, she had heard the approaching tramp of heavy feet, the soft whisper of subdued voices, and again her thoughts had fled to ghosts.

Nearer and nearer came the sound of feet, and, unable to stand the suspense any longer, she jumped lightly from her bed and moved to the window. Hidden behind the flowering chintz she stared fearfully out, and then she almost laughed aloud in a quick relief. For these were no spectral beings who were walking beneath her window. Five young men, clothed voluminously in oilskins and headed by a little man who seemed to be their leader, were fast approaching the door of the inn. Two of the party appeared to be carrying something, for they had lagged behind the others, and as they passed her Shirley's heart missed a beat, for that which they carried was the body of a man—a man whose inert appearance was grimly suggestive of death. One arm hung lankly down, nearly touching the ground, and as they passed a ray from a flashlight one carried fell straight upon it, and to her horror Shirley saw that the small finger of his hand was missing.

Quickly they passed and were soon out of sight, and creeping softly to her door she listened intently and could hear low voices speaking in the hall. She could distinguish

none of the words, however, and after a while the cold of the night drove her back to her bed, where she lay for a long time pondering the strange sight she had just seen. There had been something indefinably sinister about the little group, and a curious fear of this ancient inn and of the surly people in the village filled her heart.

But with the morning sunlight all her forebodings vanished. The day was June at its best, and in its wholesome sanity her feelings of the night before appeared fantastic. Quickly she descended to the dining-room and commenced upon her breakfast, and when she had finished it the innkeeper approached. There was a crafty look upon his face, and again, for no tangible reason, the girl felt a shiver of keen aversion.

"Good morning, Miss Grange," he said quietly. "I hope you had a good night . . . that your bed was comfortable."

"It was—very comfortable," she answered; "but, tell me, Mr. Macrae, what on earth happened last night? I woke up about one o'clock and saw some people carrying a man into the inn. Was he badly hurt?"

For one instant the man's eyes narrowed and a quick frown darkened his face, but at once he replied and there was no hint in his voice of any annoyance.

" I'm sorry you were disturbed," he said. " It wasn't anything serious. One of the fishermen had some sort of a fit. He's all right this morning. That's the man over there—the one mending his net."

He pointed out of the open window towards a couple of men who were seated on the steps of the nearest cottage, and Shirley stared at them intently. Instinctively her gaze fell to the hands of the working man and for a moment her heart missed a beat. For the innkeeper was lying. This was not the man she had seen carried into the place in the early dawn . . . for neither of his hands was in any way maimed.

" But it can't be," she cried impulsively, and on the instant she stopped. There was a tenseness, a sudden rigidity in the face of the innkeeper which drove her to discretion. " I mean . . . it's impossible he should have recovered so soon," she faltered lamely, and in her heart she cursed the folly of her ready tongue.

But the man shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

" Oh, they're a pretty hardy lot around here," he said, and with the words the matter was dismissed. For without pausing for a moment he continued to speak, and there was now a purpose in his manner which gripped the girl's attention.

" I was wondering, Miss Grange, whether you would be inclined to sell the ' Olde Shippe ' to me," he said. " I can pay you a good price for it . . . probably more than it's really worth, for I've been here a good many years now, and . . . well, the place has grown on me. Would you consider an offer ? "

He was looking at her intently, but the girl did not hesitate.

" No," she said, and even as she said it she felt surprised at her own prompt refusal. " No. I don't want to sell. . . . I'm going to make this inn a paying proposition. . . . I intend to advertise and fill the place with guests."

She laughed as she spoke, but there was no answering smile upon the other's face. For a long moment there was silence, and then, very slowly, almost menacingly he spoke :

" Advertising costs a lot of money," he said slowly, " and often it's not worth the while. I won't take your refusal as final, Miss Grange. Think it over . . . perhaps you might do worse."

" Perhaps you might do worse "—the words echoed strangely in her mind as half an hour later Shirley drove the car swiftly along the narrow village street and started to mount that precipitous cliff down which she had

driven on the day before. For a moment she turned and stared back at the little village below, noting the play of sunlight on the dancing water, the whiteness of its cottages, the atmosphere of peace that seemed so tranquilly to brood there ; and a deep distaste for the place came over her. Remembrance of the churlishness of its inhabitants dimmed the beauty to her eyes, and half aloud she murmured the words :

" Where only man is vile."

The phrase set her mind running on the strange event of the night before, and her thoughts were deeply engaged as she drove along, so that it was without paying much attention to the fact that, arriving at a signpost pointing to the nearest town, she turned down the side road and drove quickly along. It was from this town that she had come ; indeed the only motor roads going to the village led from it.

Deep in thought the girl turned swiftly round a sudden bend . . . and only the sky lay before her.

The front wheels of her car were already half over the edge of the cliff, which at this point fell sheer to the beach below, by the time that she had brought it to a standstill ; frantically she reversed, and when the car was well out of danger the girl collapsed. For a few moments

she lay back upon the cushions almost senseless, shaking in every limb . . . for her escape had been very narrow. Slowly she scrambled from the car and walked gingerly to the edge of the cliff. Her face became even more white as she stared down at the waves which were now thundering at its base—for the tide was high—and an attack of giddiness forced her back to the safety of the car, where she sank down, trembling.

This would have been no accident : of that Shirley was convinced. The thing had been intentional : someone had planned her death. For engrossed though she had been in her own thoughts, she knew, beyond any possibility of doubt, that she had taken that road which the signpost indicated. Whether it should have been the one on her left or right it was impossible that she should have remembered from her journey there of the day before ; the way to Freeth called for innumerable such turns and bends . . . but that signpost must have been moved.

And at the realisation a sudden horror of the place filled her heart : she felt lonely as she had never been before. Fearfully she looked behind her and listened for the sound of a furtive step. But there was none : no sounds at all save the melancholy twitterings of some seagulls and the plaintive beatings of the

waves. A sudden panic stirred her into life. Turning the car, she drove back at a furious pace along the road down which she had come to what had so nearly been an instant death. Eagerly she looked for the signpost, and as she caught sight of it her face grew very stern. For now she knew her suspicions had been only too well-founded . . . that signpost was pointing to the wrong road and only one person driving a car from Freeth would have needed its guidance that morning . . . and that person was the new owner of the Olde Shippe Inne.

Never slackening speed for a moment, the girl rode swiftly past it, and along the right road leading to the town for which she was bound. But now her thoughts were intent upon her driving; fearfully she scanned the road lest her enemies had yet further cards to play. But nothing else occurred, and it was with a curious feeling of strangeness, as though she had but now escaped from the grip of some infamous nightmare, that at last Shirley Grange arrived at her journey's end. This was a very different girl, however, from the one who had set out so gaily on the previous day to drive to the inn at Freeth. All gaiety had gone, and behind the thoughtful stillness of her face a plan of decisive action was fast developing.

AS on that evening of storm a few nights before, two men clothed in oilskins again stood waiting on the shingle of the beach, watching for a boat to round the end of the breakwater and attain the little harbour. The night was clear, a sickle moon shining brightly upon the water, and to the well-trained eyes of the men intently piercing the distance ahead a tiny black shape suddenly appeared upon the far horizon, approaching nearer at every instant and seeming almost to leap the waves rather than to force a passage through them.

A gentle hail came from the darkness, and in a very little while the rope had been thrown to the shore, the watchers had seized it and the boat was drawn in. This time there were only three men within: one, the authoritative little man, so obviously the leader; the other, a boatman who remained in charge; and the third, a tall saturnine-looking individual of Spanish mien, swarthy-skinned, with tiny gold rings pierced into his ears and a cruel mouth which boded ill for anyone whose will should cross his own.

After a muttered greeting to the two men upon the shore, the little party moved quickly

along the path leading to that glowing lantern of the Olde Shippe Inne. Even before they had knocked, the door was thrust open and the innkeeper, his manner intensely deferential, stood bowing upon the threshold. A strange expression crept into his eyes as he noted the identity of the second man, an expression that was almost akin to fear. But, without a word spoken, other than a muttered greeting, the innkeeper led the way quickly to the dining-room upon the left of the wide hall.

Moving at once to the bar at the end, he produced whisky and soda, two glasses and a large plate of sandwiches. But the leader waved these last impatiently away.

"We won't want those to-night," he said, and his voice was curt and brisk. "We haven't any time to waste: the moon is a damn sight too bright, and I'm not taking any chances. The sooner we're off the better."

As he spoke the man had been busy with the whisky bottle, and now, handing it to his companion, he drained his glass, and then turned quickly to the innkeeper.

"Well," he asked, "has he spoken yet?"

But the other shook his head.

"No," he said, "he won't say a word . . . just lies there and calls for food."

The little man laughed, a laugh which was ugly with cruelty.

"Let me see," he said, "it must be . . . four . . . no, five days since he had any. Well, he must be getting pretty weak by now."

The little man moved to the door.

"Well, it's up to Pedro," he said. "His little box of tricks ought to prove quite useful."

The swarthy-looking Spaniard drained his own glass and followed his leader to the door; in his right hand was a small case fitted with a heavy iron clasp, and as the other spoke he looked down at it almost lovingly.

"Yes," he said, "yes, Señor Cohen. . . . I t'ink our friend is going to speak to-night. I t'ink he would be well advised to speak to-night. . . . It is some time since I had any fun . . . since I had such a chance for any fun."

His voice was low and purring, and, with its slight foreign accent, not unattractive; but beneath the silky charm there lay a depth of such satanic cruelty, so devilish a longing, that one of the hearers blenched visibly. Under his ruddy tint the innkeeper's sudden pallor passed unnoticed, however, but his voice, when he spoke, was not entirely under control. Before the other two could move farther out of the room the innkeeper stepped forward.

"I . . . I hope he won't make too much

noise, sir," he said, and his eyes were very anxious. There was something he had to tell the leader—something which he knew was bound to cause displeasure. " The . . . the fact is, sir, we . . . there's a guest in the inn."

The words acted as a thunderbolt. Both men swung round instantly and stared at the innkeeper with faces livid with rage.

" You've got a guest in the inn," burst out the little man ; " you've got a guest ? "

And his voice was so thick with anger as to be almost unintelligible.

Beneath his wrath the innkeeper wilted visibly.

" I . . . I . . . I'm terribly sorry, sir, but I couldn't help it. He's a young artist . . . he's been here two days now . . . staying a week ; but it's quite all right . . ."

" It isn't quite all right," burst in the leader violently. " It's all damnably wrong ! What the devil do you mean by disobeying my orders like this ? I expressly told you that no one was to be allowed to stay here when we were using it on a job. There's our man upstairs, and you allow any Tom, Dick or Harry into the place just as though it was an ordinary inn . . ."

" But that's just the point," interrupted the innkeeper quickly. " I refused the man when he came . . . said I'd got no room . . .

that the place was full . . . but he said he didn't believe it, and that as an innkeeper I was bound by law to give him shelter. There's some view he's particularly crazy to paint, and he said if I didn't put him up he'd go to law about it. I could see he meant it, sir, so as the lesser of two evils I told him he could stay."

The man's explanation was at least successful in diverting the leader's wrath from himself.

"Who the deuce *is* this man?" he asked thoughtfully. "Some sneaking police spy? If he is . . ."

But the innkeeper shook his head.

"No, no, sir. I'm sure he's not. Just some fool artist who thinks he can paint. I've had my men shadowing him everywhere, and he spends all day long in the fields painting the sea."

"And where is he now?" came the silky voice of Pedro, who among his favoured coterie was nicknamed "The Cruel." The fingers of both his hands were working spasmodically, the only sign that the man was intensely annoyed, for after that first momentary glare of rage his face had relapsed into an icy stillness.

"In his room—fast asleep," said the innkeeper eagerly. "I've got a man posted in the corridor to let me know if he awakes. He

looks through the keyhole every ten minutes or so to make quite sure he's still asleep."

" Ah . . . I see." Pedro appeared relieved. For one terrible moment he had feared that his promised treat might have to be postponed. " Then, so long as Jean Cadiste does not protest too loudly all should go well."

" Yes, that's right, sir, it should." The innkeeper spoke quickly. " I've put him in a room in the south wing . . . a long way away from the other, so . . ."

" So, instead of wasting our time here we'd better get to work at once," broke in the leader impatiently, and again he made a move towards the door.

But again the innkeeper stopped him ; this time, however, there was no anxiety in his face as he withdrew a letter from his pocket and handed it to the other. Here, he felt, was something which would erase a little that unfortunate impression caused by his inability to dismiss the inopportune guest.

" It's a note from Miss Grange," he said. " It came the day after her visit here. Rather a pity that our little plan failed, but at least it's had good enough results. We shan't be bothered by her around here any more."

The leader, however, was not listening—already his eyes were intent upon the note :

" Dear Mr. Macrae," it ran, *" I'm afraid I am about to disappoint you in regard to the advertising I promised, but I have now decided not to bother about it. The fact is, unfortunately, I've also taken a strong dislike to the place. I had a very narrow escape from a bad accident coming back—the signpost to Marilow is on the wrong side of the road and should be altered at once. I have informed the authorities at Marilow, but perhaps you would also see that it is put right, as it is terribly dangerous—the path leads directly to the edge of the cliff. So I have now decided to let things run just as my aunt did, but for sentimental reasons I am not anxious to sell—anyway, not for the moment. However, I'm afraid it will be a very long while before I come on a visit again . . . that narrow escape has upset me rather a lot. There is one thing, however, which I feel I must say—the inn, I'm quite certain, could be in no better hands than your own.*

" Yours very truly,

" Shirley Grange."

Johan Cohen looked up ; there was a satisfied smile in his eyes as they met those of the innkeeper.

" Splendid," he said. " Splendid. You did well there, my friend. Perhaps it was just as well that our plan failed . . . there might

have been unfortunate inquiries. Far better as it is. But now to work."

And handing the note back to the other, the little man walked straight from the room into the hall and up the winding staircase leading from it. Close at his heels followed the Spaniard, while behind them came the innkeeper, a look of great relief upon his furtive features now that the worst had been told.

Very swiftly, very silently the little procession made its way up the stairs and moved along a passage on the right. There was an evil purpose about the demeanour of each, a sinister stealth which, to any onlooker acquainted with the devilish skill of Pedro the Cruel, would have been grimly suggestive. For in the underworld of two continents this man's reputation was well known: the little case with its stalwart iron clasp no less renowned, and there were very few who would have been rash enough to incur the displeasure of this unwholesome brute, whose skill at the arts of torture amounted almost to perverted genius, and whose fiendish delight in the pain that he inflicted was at times looked at askance even by the villainous men whose company he sought. A terrible craving, inherited perhaps from some vicious ancestor of the Middle Ages, had made of torture Pedro's one delight: it was his food and drink, his greatest

human passion, the only thing for which he really lived . . . and very rarely did he meet with failure. Very few lips remained unsealed once Pedro's fingers were hot upon their work ; very few secrets had ever escaped his grasp. Here was yet another which, he vowed, should not evade him.

They had arrived before a door at the end of the passage, and here they stopped. Taking a key from his pocket, the innkeeper bent down and inserted it swiftly in the lock. A second later the door swung open and the innkeeper stood aside for the two to enter.

It was a large room into which they walked, empty of occupants, and, entering quickly, the little leader moved at once towards the fireplace at the end. Leaning over the grate he turned one of the iron bars from a horizontal into a vertical position, and as he did so the whole fireplace swung slowly back, disclosing five or six steps leading up in a spiral beyond. Cautiously the man called Cohen began to ascend the stairs, and after him, bending his head to do so, came the lanky Spaniard. The innkeeper had stayed a moment to shut and lock the door of the room behind him, but now he was quick to follow.

Up the stairs they went, the leader flashing a torch to dispel the gloom, until they came to another door, studded with iron.

Pressing a catch on this, Cohen waited while the great door slowly opened, and then quickly he mounted a step and entered a narrow room. The place was black as pitch, for the only means of illumination came from a small iron-barred ventilator set high up in the ceiling, and for the moment the moon must have retired behind a cloud, for its rays did not penetrate into that dingy cell. Many candles, however, were set in sconces on the wall, and in a few moments the innkeeper had lit these, and their flickering light was bringing into quick relief the details of the room.

The only furniture consisted of a narrow trestle-bed, upon which lay a man whose attenuated features and listless, hopeless bearing spoke eloquently of his enforced presence there. His eyes were closed, but as the sudden light flickered in the room he opened them slowly and stared blankly around. The three men gathered close beside the bed, and without hesitating for one moment the eager Spaniard began hastily to unpack his tools. The weak eyes of the recumbent man listlessly roved from one to another, but as they fell upon the gold-ringed ears of Pedro the Cruel a look of utter horror widened them miserably. He opened his lips to speak, but for a moment no words would come, and, moistening them painfully, at last he managed to mutter a

few words in French, which, low though they had been, the keen ears of Johan Cohen were very quick to catch.

"Yes, Pedro the Cruel," he assented grimly. "You've had a taste of him before, haven't you? Six years ago now, isn't it, Jean Cadiste, since you lost your finger?"

And he nodded towards the man's right hand, which was clutching the coverlet feverishly, and the little finger of which was significantly missing.

Johan Cohen had spoken in the French patois of the underworld of Paris, a patois with which his three hearers were quite well acquainted. And at his words an utter hopelessness crept into the haggard face of the helpless man. Again he moistened his lips painfully, before managing to murmur some words, and the little man leant forward to catch them. And then he laughed, a cruel laugh, singularly devoid of any trace of mirth.

"You're hungry, are you? I expect you are—damnably hungry. But you can take my word for it, Jean Cadiste, unless you tell us what we want to know you'll never touch a bite of food again. A year ago you became butler to a certain Marquis—a position which, with a certain amount of difficulty, I obtained for you. Six months ago the Marquis was robbed of all his jewels, the first I heard of it

being through the papers, although "—and a bitter note crept into the voice of Johan Cohen—"although you were pledged to bring them to me. You dirty little double-crossing rat! What a fool you were to think you could play the traitor on me . . . me, Johan Cohen! What a fool!"

He laughed harshly, and then leant forward menacingly.

"Tell me, Jean Cadiste, *where have you hidden those jewels?*"

The last question was rapped out with the sudden rapidity of a bullet speeding from a gun; but the man did not answer, except to shake his head restlessly from side to side.

"Where have you hidden them?" rapped out Johan Cohen again. "You'd much better tell us now, Jean Cadiste. We're bound to find out, you know."

He paused a moment, and then he laughed cruelly.

"You poor worm, d'you think you won't be only too crazy to speak once Pedro starts on you? Now then, where have you hidden them?"

But the other did not answer, and with a motion to the Spaniard the little leader got up and made room for him beside the bed.

With fingers trembling in their eagerness, one by one each instrument of torture he

removed from the case, placing them in an orderly row upon the floor. Then, approaching his victim, whose eyes were shut again and who now lay almost senseless upon the bed, Pedro turned back the clothes and prepared to start. First of all the man's mouth was securely gagged, and then one by one the devilish tools were made to do their work.

For twenty minutes the man resisted, twenty minutes during which his shrieks of anguish were effectively muffled by the gag, twenty minutes during which his body writhed agonisingly upon the bed in unbearable pain. And at last the end came. Every few minutes Johan Cohen had repeated the vital question :

" Will you speak ? "

And now the man nodded his head in feeble assent. On the instant the Spaniard stopped his work, the gag was removed and Cohen leant over the bed, a look of cunning triumph in his eyes.

" Well," he said, " Where are they ? "

The man tried to speak, but the effort was too great, and it was only after draining a glass of water, which was at once handed to him, that the weak voice managed to murmur :

" Fifty-three . . . Rue . . . du . . . Petit . . . Coq . . . in the cellar."

" Ah ! "

A long-drawn sigh of pleasure escaped the tight lips of Pedro the Cruel ; his cunning had not been wasted, and, fondling them lovingly, he began to return each deadly tool to its place within his case.

. . . . .

As he did so, a man who throughout the last half-hour had been lying flat upon the roof of the Old Shippe Inne, his eyes glued intently to a tiny iron ventilator, his ears engrossed upon the words the men were speaking, slid softly along the gutter to a pear-tree at the back of the building, which twined its leafy branches along the wall immediately beneath. Lifting his head cautiously he peered around, and then, seeing the coast was clear, very gently, very noiselessly, he swung himself over the stone parapet of the roof and on to the spreading branches of the tree. Nimbly he clambered down it, and a moment or two later had crept down the garden of the inn to the beach that lay beyond. Choosing a tall rock to be his hiding-place, he slipped down behind it and remained motionless, waiting silently for what he guessed he was about to see.

And after ten minutes or so his vigil was rewarded. For the pebbles of the shingle scrunched noisily beneath the tread of heavy

footfalls, and, as he peered cautiously around the rock, Alan Grahame could see that four men were moving on the beach and between two of them a limp figure was carried, a figure closely swathed in bandages, which moaned slightly as they moved.

A boat was drawn up upon the beach and into this the helpless man was flung. Pedro and the man called Cohen clambered in beside him, and then the boat quickly began to move and soon was lost to sight in the darkness of the far horizon.

Like a shadow the watching man slipped back into the garden of the inn, stared around him carefully, and, seeing he was still unobserved, climbed swiftly up the pear-tree again and on to the roof. Lying flat upon the tiles, very cautiously he pulled himself along until he reached a point directly over an open window. In a few seconds he had lowered himself to the sill and had slipped into the room.

Before daring to emerge, however, he remained for some moments motionless, fearful lest he should have made any suspicious sound to attract attention, and then, hoping fervently that no watcher was now peering furtively through the keyhole, very gently he slipped into the room, removed the rubber shoes he had been wearing and crossed over

to the bed on which his bolster and a wig were giving so realistic an impression of a sleeping man. Removing these, he undressed quickly and then clambered into bed. Even as he did so he could hear stealthy footsteps creeping past his door. For a moment they stopped, and realising that possibly someone was now surveying him through the keyhole, Alan Grahame remained quite still, breathing as evenly as his hurried movements of the past few minutes made possible. Only for a second, however, did the footsteps pause, and then he heard them continue on their way, and with a sigh of relief the young man knew he was now alone.

For many hours during that night he lay staring at the wall before him, and his face was very drawn and white. His eyes had seen too many horrors during his vigil to be wooed easily into the oblivion of sleep; his brain was too alert, too fevered with surmisings, too full of doubts to allow him rest.

It was not until the first cock had begun to herald in the day that, his mind made up, at last Alan Grahame sank into a troubled slumber.

BIG BEN was striking five on the afternoon of that same day whose dawn had brought to Alan Grahame some much-needed rest, when the young man entered the lofty building of New Scotland Yard. He was looking tired and rather white, for it was little more than an hour ago since he had descended from the aeroplane at Croydon which had brought him back, in an extraordinarily short space of time, from the coast of Devon. By his side walked a tall, slim girl whose attractive face was now clouded with a frown of anxiety and perhaps fear. There was a determined look about both of them, however, a look which the burly constable who met them at the door did not fail to note and treat with due respect.

"I want to see Detective-Inspector Cardew," said Alan quickly. "I rang him up from Devon this morning and arranged an appointment with him for five o'clock. My name is Grahame."

The man nodded his head at once.

"Oh, yes, sir. The Inspector told me that I was to show you to his private office immediately. This way, if you please."

In a few minutes they were ushered into

a small, very official-looking room whose chief furniture seemed to consist of an enormous desk, at which was seated a keen-visaged man of middle age who rose quickly to his feet as they entered and moved forward to greet them.

The two men shook hands warmly. Their friendship, although started casually enough upon the heaving decks of a Channel steamer, had ripened through years into something which both prized very dearly : this, despite a considerable disparity of age. But as the elder man greeted Alan Grahame there was a hint of curiosity in his eyes, for this was the first time, throughout their acquaintance, that the latter had ever solicited his professional services. No trace of this, however, was audible in his voice or apparent in his manner when he spoke.

" Good afternoon, Alan," he said, and there was a brisk, decisive quality in his speech which was unusually cheering. " I never expected to be seeing you to-day . . . your phone call gave me a very welcome surprise."

Alan's only answer, however, was a smile, a smile which struck his friend as being forced : there was a strained, mechanical air about it which he had never seen before, and which, quite definitely, he did not like. But Alan now turned to the girl by his side.

" I want to introduce you to Miss Grange," he said. He hesitated a moment and then smiled shyly : " We . . . we've only recently become engaged."

Cardew shook hands with her warmly.

" I'm so pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Grange," he said. " Congratulations to both of you. But "—and he swung round to Alan humorously—" surely this isn't what you've come to tell me, Alan. From your voice over the phone I had expected something pretty grim."

Alan nodded his head.

" And it's something pretty grim I've come to tell you," he said slowly.

" Well, take a seat . . . try that one with the arms, Miss Grange ; it's the best I can offer. Cigarette ? "

" Thank you."

In a few moments they were all seated, Detective-Inspector Cardew leaning over his desk with eyes intent upon the pair before him.

" I've had a bad shock," started Alan slowly ; " we've both had bad shocks, in fact, and I've found out something which looks as though your department should be getting busy."

He stopped for a moment and then turned to Cardew suddenly.

" Have you ever heard of a man called Johan Cohen ? " he asked.

The Inspector thought for a moment and then he shook his head.

" No, I don't think I ever have," he said at last.

" Of Jean Cadiste, then ? " urged Alan eagerly.

But again, after a moment's thought, James Cardew shook his head.

" No," He paused ; then with a quick smile : " What about telling me the story properly, Alan ? Right from the beginning . . . leave out details, if you like, but nothing material."

" Right."

For a few moments the young man was silent as though engaged upon marshalling his thoughts, and suddenly he turned to the girl by his side.

" I think you'd better tell the first part, Shirley," he said. " That's really your show . . . and then I'll follow on. Remember "— and he smiled at her whimsically—" be short but to the point : brief but sufficiently loquacious."

The girl bowed to him mockingly, and then she began to speak, and as she did so the smile that had momentarily brightened her face vanished, and an anxious look crept back

into the lovely blue eyes. In a low, clear voice Shirley Grange told the Inspector all that had happened during those hours when she had been staying in the little village of Freeth: the strange, unfriendly attitude of all its inhabitants; that sinister procession in the dead of night when two men had carried between them a recumbent figure, the little finger of whose left hand was so significantly missing; the obvious lie with which the innkeeper had sought to stem her curiosity; and, finally, that narrow escape from a death which had so palpably been planned. And when the girl had stopped speaking a look of great interest filled the gaunt face of James Cardew. Without a word, however, he turned to Alan and gave him a scarcely perceptible nod. On the instant the young man took up the tale:

"That afternoon Shirley came to me and told me what had happened," he continued. "She wanted to go to the police about it straight away, but I—well, I thought it would be rather fun to do a little mild prospecting on my own account, so I made her write that letter and promise to do nothing more about it for the moment. Then, without her knowledge, I went to the Old Shippe Inne, describing myself as an artist, and I can tell you the whole place struck me as pretty suspicious from the first moment. I had the devil

of a job getting a room in the inn ; but at last, and then only by threatening him with the law, I got the innkeeper to put me up for a few days. I was there only two, as it happened, but I found out a very great deal."

He paused for a moment, and then he leant forward towards the intent man behind the desk.

" There's something very shady going on in that village, Jimmy—something pretty big, too. The whole place is a sham . . . it's not a village, at all, it's a plant . . . a factory, or whatever else you like to call it which means a place where the work is done . . . for there's nothing residential about Freeth. First of all, there are no women there—not a single one—and no children . . . and the fishermen are no more fishermen than I am : they're a damn sight too intelligent-looking, too cunning, too —too cosmopolitan. I tell you, Jimmy, the whole thing's a blind. Every night about seven o'clock the boats go out ; not during the day, mind, only at night. And they don't seem to catch much fish. There's only one general stores in the place, and you couldn't feed a dozen men on the fish they manage to collect and sell there. And I'm certain they don't sell it anywhere else . . . I made inquiries at Marilow and round about, and it's true enough. So "—and his voice became suddenly

very low and tense—" so how do they get the money to live ? . . . You can't get rich on doing each other's washing, and they certainly couldn't thrive as well as they do by buying each other's fish. So, you see, Jimmy, I determined to find out, and all the time while I was sitting in the fields painting frightful daubs on a piece of paper I kept watching and listening and thinking . . . and on the evening of the second day I found out."

" Found out ? "

James Cardew looked surprised, almost disappointed, and Alan answered him quickly.

" Not everything, of course—there's still lots for you to do—but I found out a bit . . . for instance, what's the staple industry of that charming little old-world village."

He paused and the other watched him intently ; then, somewhat dramatically, Alan continued :

" It's nothing else but . . . *crime* ! "

The young man stared eagerly at his friend, perhaps expecting some movement of surprise, some hint of suppressed excitement, but if so he was doomed to disappointment, for the shrewd eyes merely returned his stare gravely enough, and the Inspector's voice was quite calm and unmoved when he spoke.

" And how did you find that out ? " was all he said.

Then, very vividly, Alan Grahame described all that he had seen through that tiny iron ventilator set in the roof of the Olde Shippe Inne, and as he spoke of the devilish skill of that man called Pedro the Cruel a strange hush seemed to fall upon the room, the air became charged with a tenser gravity and the gaunt features of the listening Inspector became at every instant yet more stern. At last the tale came to an end, and for a moment there was silence in the room, a silence which was broken at last by a noisy scraping on the floor as James Cardew rose, pushed his chair back and then began to pace the carpet, a worried look darkening his eager little eyes.

Suddenly he turned to Alan.

"You're quite certain of the names?" he asked, "and of that address? They're all we've got to go by?"

Alan nodded his head vigorously.

"Quite, quite certain," he said. "My French is pretty good, as it happens, and although they were speaking in some kind of a patois there were only one or two words I couldn't understand, and I caught the gist all right. And as for the address . . ." He paused for a moment and almost a shrinking look crept into his eyes. "I'm only hoping that the time will come when I can get that

hopeless voice out of my ears. It . . . it's not a thing I'm likely to forget easily."

James Cardew looked at him sympathetically for a moment, and then he nodded his head in understanding.

"No," he said, "I suppose not."

He was silent for a long time as though finding it difficult to come to a decision, and then he spoke quickly:

"Alan," he said, "you've always prided yourself on your powers as an amateur detective; well, here's your chance."

A light gleamed in the young man's eyes and he sat bolt upright.

"You . . . you mean officially?" he asked, and his tone was eager.

James Cardew smiled at him.

"Well, yes, in a way officially," he said. "You see, Alan, this is what I'll do. You're the only man who can recognise these people, therefore you're the best man for the job . . ." He paused for a moment and then turned to the other quickly. "That is—if you're willing?"

The young man laughed.

"Willing?" he said, and his voice was eloquent.

"That being the case," went on Cardew firmly, "I want you to go to France immediately—there's an aeroplane leaving Croydon

at seven o'clock. One of my men will go with you. I'll let the Sûreté know about you both, and they'll probably send along one of their men, too. Go to that address to-night and see what you can get. I'm not going to give you any fuller instructions, Alan, because Ferrers can deal with all that—he's a good man and you'll like him, but I want you to promise me one thing : if you get in any jam get in touch with me at once ? Is that clear ? "

Alan nodded. He had risen from his chair, and was now walking excitedly about the room.

" Yes," he said, " yes, I think so . . . that's to say "—and he laughed a little breathlessly —" nothing at all *is* clear, really, is it ? We don't know what we're after, except that it's something pretty big. But "—and a steely glint came into the young man's eyes— " whatever their rotten game is, I'm going to find it out . . . they went a step too far when they tried that trick on Shirley. . . ."

" But, you see, we must have proof," broke in James Cardew calmly ; " and it's up to you, Alan, to get it. That is, to Ferrers and you. I'll send for him now."

He was about to ring for the officer to be sent to him when Shirley Grange, who throughout the conversation had sat very still and silent in her chair, her eyes moving

anxiously from one to another of the men before her, her face becoming every moment more drawn and white, now jumped suddenly to her feet, and when she spoke her voice was pitched high in a strained, unnatural tone which impelled immediate attention.

"It's ridiculous sending Alan to France, Inspector Cardew," she said, "ridiculous. I . . . I don't want him to go. He's not trained like your men. . . . It's dangerous . . . we came to you for help, not . . ."

But the Inspector was quick to reassure her.

"There won't be much danger, Miss Grange," he said, and his tone was kindly. "Ferrers is a very clever man, and . . . well, I think Alan himself would take a lot of killing."

"But why should he go at all?" burst out Shirley angrily. "I don't see . . ."

Again the other interrupted soothingly.

"But you must see, Miss Grange," he urged, "that Alan's much the best man for the job. He's seen these people; and, besides, he knows the lingo . . ."

"And it will be the greatest *fun*," interrupted Alan quickly. "You must see that, Shirley. I—I *do* understand it's rather rough on you, but, really, there's no need for you to worry, darling. I promise you that. I'll probably be back again to-morrow, and . . ."

The girl quietly brushed his protestations aside.

" Then let me come too," she said. " I also know the language, and . . ."

" That's quite impossible," broke in Inspector Cardew gravely. " I'm afraid I couldn't permit it, Miss Grange. Forgive me, but you must see that you'd only be a hampering influence."

Five minutes were wasted in this unavailing dispute, and then Shirley at last gave in, but there was a strange look on her face as she left the building a little later accompanied by Alan—a look which, because he could not understand it, troubled him slightly.

Alan had to return to the Yard within half an hour to pick up Ferrers, with whom he was to set off that night for France, so, hailing a taxi he told the man to drive at once to the Cosmos Hotel, where Shirley had booked a room.

And at about the same time that evening a little man of determined mien began to walk slowly along Piccadilly, pausing now and again to gaze in a shop window, and as he walked he smiled to himself, for several things had occurred that day to please the heart of Johan Cohen. Nearing the Cosmos Hotel he came to a standstill upon the kerb, waiting for a gap in the passing traffic in order to enable

him to cross the road, and at that moment a taxi slowed down a few yards from him. It only slowed, however, and did not stop, for to his surprise the driver heard an excited voice calling down the speaking-tube and bidding him go on until he was told to stop.

Shirley Grange looked at her companion in astonishment.

"Why . . . what . . . ?" she started.

But Alan was again speaking through the tube, and an instant later the taxi came to a standstill.

Furtively the young man craned his head around the window and only then turned to Shirley.

"Darling," he said, "I've just seen Johan Cohen. . . . We must not lose sight of him. Quick!"

Paying off the taxi, Alan started back along the street and pointed out to Shirley the man he was after. With the afternoon sunlight upon him Johan Cohen looked a very different creature from the man who had been present at that atrocious scene of torture on the previous night. Short though he was, his distinction of dress and bearing was at once apparent, and as she looked at him the girl felt certain that there must be some mistake. She turned to Alan.

"Surely you don't mean that aristocratic

little man trying to cross the road ? " she said.

Alan nodded.

" That's the man," he murmured ; " and it's just because he *is* so aristocratic-looking that we've got to be careful. He's not the type to dirty his hands on a twopenny-ha'penny job. No—he's on to something big, and . . ."

But a sudden gap in the traffic had given the man they were watching his opportunity, and in a second he had darted across to the side they were on. Pushing Shirley quickly into the doorway of a shop, Alan darted in beside her, and together they waited in an agony of suspense for the man to pass.

Very soon he did so. Alan whispered to Shirley, and in a moment they were quickly following the little figure hastening on its way.

He turned up Bond Street, and still they followed him, taking every care to remain unobserved. They saw him halt before the door of an imposing jeweller's shop ; he glanced around, and then, after pausing to stare at the contents of the window, he walked inside.

Seething with excitement the two followers took up their position in the doorway of a shop opposite, whence they could see without being seen, and set themselves to wait.

Five minutes passed . . . ten . . . fifteen . . . and still the man remained inside that shop, and an anxious look crept into the face of Alan Grahame. For in a very little while he was due back at the Yard—an appointment which nothing must deter him from keeping, for surely his presence in France that night was of primary importance. And, after another five minutes had finally dragged along, he turned to the girl.

" Shirley," he said, " I'll have to go. Be an angel . . . wait here until the man comes out and then see where he goes. As soon as you find out, ring up the Yard and speak to Jimmy. But, for heaven's sake, darling, don't let Cohen see you. And if there's the slightest danger—drop the chase. Promise me that, won't you? "

His tone was very eager, very grave, and Shirley nodded her head quickly, but a sudden light was shining in the clear blue eyes.

" I'll bolt along to the Yard now," went on Alan immediately, " and get them to send a man back. If he gets here before our friend has left, that relieves you, darling; then don't bother any more. Good-bye, my sweet; Good luck. See you to-morrow . . . probably."

He kissed her hurriedly and then vanished. A few minutes later he was heading back by taxi to the Yard.

Left to herself, Shirley Grange smiled

thoughtfully ; that dangerous little gleam still shone in her eyes, which were ever intent upon a door that was opposite. And abruptly this was opened and a little fat man of distinguished bearing slipped out into the street and proceeded to move quickly away. A moment later, like a shadow, the girl was following in his wake, and her lips were parted in a smile of triumph.

CHAPTER V THE TREASURE NETS.

TOWARDS ten o'clock of the same evening when rain was falling in a steady drizzle. three men made their way cautiously along a spacious street of Paris known as the Rue du Petit Coq. There was no moon and the night was a dark one, so it was with small fear of being observed that Alan Grahame and his two companions—John Ferrers, a stolid, capable official of the Yard, and Jules Duprès, small, slight and on the surface excitable, of the Sûreté, moved quickly along towards an imposing mansion a few yards away, before which a cumbersome sign indicating "*Maison à louer*" proclaimed its emptiness. All the houses in that street were imposing ; vast places, the names of whose owners, Alan had been told, ranked

high in Parisian aristocracy. The house for which they were bound, however, had been vacant for several years, and so little hope was there of letting it that its owners had for long dispensed even with the services of an ancient caretaker.

Five stone steps led to the door, and as they reached this Duprès, after a keen glance around, bent down swiftly and turned a key in the lock. Without a sound the great door swung open and the three men moved quickly inside.

It was very dark within, and at first Alan could see nothing, but gradually, his eyes becoming accustomed to the gloom, he was able to discern the vague outlines of his two companions. Duprès had closed the door silently upon them and was now standing motionless, his eyes striving to pierce the black shadows beyond, his ears agog for the slightest sound betraying another's presence. As he stared at him Alan suddenly realised that held in the Frenchman's right hand gleamed a dangerous-looking little automatic. At once he turned to John Ferrers on the other side of him and his breath came quickly, for he saw that a similar weapon was clasped firmly in his hand. Quickly his own slipped to his pocket and in a moment he was equally well armed.

A silence of that shattering sort which so

often seems to fill an empty house—a silence peopled with multitudinous sounds as of men whispering and walking gently overhead—began to unnerve the young man, and he was glad when at last Duprès moved forward towards a door at the end of the parquet-floored passage. Pushing this gently open he listened intently and then began to tiptoe noiselessly down a winding staircase which led below. His heart beating excitedly, Alan prepared to follow him, but even as he did so Ferrers clutched him by the arm. He was shaking his head meaningly, and at once Alan grasped his reason: useless for them all to risk the blackness of those winding stairs; far better for them to remain where they were and thus form an effective rear-guard, should such a necessity arise.

For what seemed like five minutes, but must in reality have been considerably less, Alan stood rigid beside John Ferrers, listening eagerly for the sound of movement in the rooms beneath. But there was none . . . only those muted whisperings which the place itself seemed to breed. At last, just when he felt that he could bear the suspense and strain of waiting no longer, a light shone through the blackness, and silently as he had gone the little Frenchman reappeared through the door and stood beside them.

"It's all right," he whispered, in surprisingly excellent English. "There's no one below. . . . I've just examined the back door and that's not been opened in years . . . it's a mass of cobwebs. Just a moment—I'll have a look at the front."

Darting back to the great front door, Duprès lowered his torch to the keyhole, then flashed it about the woodwork and the floor. In a few moments he returned to the others, and there was a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"It's all right," he murmured; "this door has not been opened for months . . . the dust on the floor has never been disturbed for just as long. No—I think it's all right, Mr. Grahame; I think we have arrived in time."

A great relief entered Alan's heart at these words, for many times during that day had he regretted not having taken some more decisive action, some action such as cabling the Sûreté himself before he had left Devon on the previous day, which would have ensured that the police arrived first at this mysterious house and witnessed the strange doings of Johan Cohen. But Johan Cohen was now in London, under the eye, Alan felt certain, of the Yard itself, while here he was, accompanied by the police, actually within the house of the Rue du Petit Coq about to descend at once

to those cellars of which Jean Cadiste had so reluctantly been forced to speak.

Duprès had moved again towards the green baize door at the top of the staircase, and with a word to them to follow he led the way down the steps, through some empty, airless rooms to a heavy iron-studded door at the end of what must once have been the servants' hall. The door was unlocked, and in a few minutes they were descending some perilously steep steps leading into a spacious cellar below.

Eagerly they entered, cast one hurried glance around . . . and then stopped, aghast. Consternation and disappointment were reflected in the eyes of each, for that one glance had been sufficient to convince them all that Duprès had been mistaken . . . they had so very clearly arrived too late. Empty cases lay littered about the floor, out of which straw straggled in significant profusion and even to the untrained eyes of Alan Grahame the state of the place was eloquent enough as to the latest scene which had so recently been enacted there. Out of each of those cases on the floor, where, perhaps, in happier days the most delicate wines were stored, something had been taken, the straw which had covered them all being flung hastily on to the stone flags of the cellar floor. Haste, apparently, had been a

vital feature, for having secured that which they had sought, no attempt had been made by the marauders to cover up their tracks.

Simultaneously the two police officers darted towards those cases on the floor, and in the light provided by their torches began a rapid examination of each, alert for the slightest clue which might prove useful. Alan watched them dejectedly for a moment, but their movements filled him with little hope and small interest. Moodily he glanced around, noting the solid walls which barred out any damp, the stone flags of the floor worn by the feet of numerous aged servants ; listlessly his gaze turned towards that pile of straw which lay in clumps upon it . . . and suddenly the young man stiffened. For his eyes had caught the brilliant sparkle of a gem.

Moving swiftly forward he stooped down abruptly, and in his hand lay a tiny golden locket—a locket in which a pattern of diamonds and pearls spelt out the initials " F.-l.-B." In that gloomy cellar the precious thing seemed strangely out of place, and as he stared at it Alan's heart beat fast.

The two detectives were already by his side, and suddenly Duprès, an excited light shining in his beady little eyes, burst out eagerly :

" F.-l.-B. . . . that explains everything. . . . F.-l.-B., don't you see ? F.-l.-B. ! "

Alan and Ferrers looked at him in surprise ; and at their expressions the little Frenchman laughed.

" No, of course you wouldn't see," he cried. " You've probably never even heard of the Marquis de Fevril-le-Bois ? "

Alan shook his head. John Ferrers looked completely blank, but the little Frenchman did not offer to explain. Instead, he slipped the locket into his pocket-book and turned abruptly to Ferrers.

" M'sieur here has all the luck," he said. " The cases provide us nothing . . . not even a solitary fingermark . . . but perhaps the straw will be kinder."

His hope was not fulfilled, however, for after a most exhaustive examination of the tangled straw the three men had to admit that nothing else had been overlooked.

" All that remains to be done," said Ferrers disappointedly, " is to find out how the men got in. The doors, of course, are out of it ; so supposing we divide up the windows between us, Mr. Duprès. I'll examine the back ones and you take the front. Mr. Grahame, you'd better come with me."

The Frenchman at once nodded assent and led the way up the steps into the kitchen beyond. Alan saw him move towards the windows in the front and then he hastened to

follow John Ferrers, who was already half-way up the stairs.

The next twenty minutes were monotonous to the point of tedium itself, and Alan began to get extremely bored as he moved from room to room after the detective, and watched him flash his torch around each bolted window. For all of them were bolted, fastened securely in a way which denied all possibility of any exit having been effected therefrom, clustered with the dust of years, which equally negatived the fact of any recent entrance through them; and as they mounted steadily from floor to floor Alan could see the frown of perplexity deepen appreciably upon John Ferrers' brow.

One . . . two . . . three . . . four flights did they ascend, and still without discovering any means by which the men had entered. Occasionally Alan saw the little Frenchman hastening up the stairs or darting into a room, but there had come from him no cry of revelation to denote success. At last they had reached the top landing, had examined, fruitlessly, two rooms at the back, and were proceeding to the last, when Duprès joined them. His face was a question-mark of mute bewilderment. He had examined the three windows in the front rooms on this landing, with a like result.

"I have examined them all," he said

excitedly, "all the windows in the front, and it is hopeless. No one has entered that way. You are sure about the back ? "

Ferrers nodded.

" Quite sure," he said firmly. " They've been locked for years. There's just one room left, Mr. Duprès. Otherwise . . ."

He shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

In silence they entered the last room, but as soon as the rays from Ferrers' torch were played upon the window all three realised that the mystery of the marauders' entrance was still unsolved. For here again the bolts were drawn, the dust lay thick, and a sense of utter blankness seized them all.

As he glanced about him a sudden chill made Alan shiver ; for here there was something uncanny, some inhuman element which disturbed profoundly, and as he listened to the whispering silence of that gloomy house the young man felt a twinge of very real fear touch his heart. He was too much a Celt to be void of superstition, and in that rustling quiet anything seemed possible.

Not to his companions, however, for as with one accord, after one quick glance around the room, Duprès and Ferrers had moved straight across the floor towards a large cupboard which stood at the farthest end. In every room, besides examining the

windows, John Ferrers had opened every cupboard, subjecting each portion of the room, even the chimney itself, to a careful inspection. It was therefore with no special interest that Alan watched his movements: no special interest until, Duprès having seized the small white knob which acted as door-handle and pulled it without result, he realised that the cupboard was locked.

The need for action acts oddly on certain people. Instantly all Alan's forebodings vanished, and in a moment he was by their side. Together, without a word being spoken, all three lent their strength towards the task of breaking down that door . . . and in a few minutes, with a shattering crash which echoed loudly in that quiet house, the panels snapped and the door swung open on its hinges.

With a cry of triumph the three men rushed forward to enter . . . and then stopped on the instant. Alan's face assumed a livid tinge, his eyes became blurred for a moment with the horror of the sight . . . for lying crumpled up upon the floor of that cupboard, his head lolling forward helplessly upon his chest, blood coming gently in an ugly stream from a wound in his temple, lay the man whom Alan had last seen stretched out upon a trestle-bed in that secret room of the Olde

Shippe Inne at Freeth . . . the man whose right hand was minus a small finger . . . the man who was known as Jean Cadiste.

"*Jean Cadiste!*"

Almost without his knowing it the name burst from between Alan's lips, and at once the two detectives, whom the tragic sight had startled into a momentary rigidity, swung round to him.

"You know him?" asked Ferrers quickly.

Alan nodded.

"It's Jean Cadiste," he repeated dazedly, "the man I saw tortured in that inn at Freeth."

Duprès had fallen on his knees beside the outstretched body, but after a quick examination he rose to his feet again, and there was a baffled, anxious expression in his eyes, an expression which was quickly reflected in those of his companions.

"But who placed him there . . .? How did they get away? How did they come? They certainly came back through this room . . . but where to? And where's the key gone of the door itself?"

The questions were jerked out of him excitedly like bullets from a gun, but the others only shook their heads helplessly.

And then Alan sprang forward. A sudden idea had come to him, an idea bordering on

conviction itself, and lifting the body gently from the cupboard he stepped gingerly inside and began to pass his hands over the wall behind. At once his actions were understood by the others, and without a word they joined him and proceeded to tap every spot in search of a hidden entrance.

Suddenly, after perhaps five minutes of patient tapping, the fingers of John Ferrers touched upon a hidden spring, and at once a tiny door in the wall opened, a door just big enough to allow a man to pass through, and without pausing for a moment Duprès did so. The others were about to follow when a whisper from the Frenchman stopped them.

"Wait a moment," he said; "there isn't room for more than one at a time. This seems to be another cupboard."

Even as he spoke a shaft of light came from the darkness ahead.

"It's all right," murmured Duprès; "the door wasn't locked. Come on."

At once the others followed, climbed through the tiny door and then out of another cupboard exactly similar to the one on the other side of the wall, into a passage as dark and gloomy as the one they had but lately left. There was a subtle difference about this passage, a difference of which all three were quick to catch the significance. For the

floor was richly carpeted, and the rays of the torch revealed no dusty accumulations of bygone years. They were in the house next door, a house which was tenanted; and as this realisation dawned upon them, all three stiffened as at the approach of a very certain danger. For whoever owned this house must undoubtedly be implicated in the murder.

Very carefully, very noiselessly, they moved along the passage, and down some stairs to the landing below. Very cautiously, very silently, they descended to the next . . . and so on, until they had at last reached the ground floor, but not a sound came to their ears—the house seemed indeed to be a mansion of affluent dead, and to Alan's overstrained nerves even the whisper of their feet upon the heavy pile of the carpet seemed to herald their coming with a dangerous clamour. But no one appeared to hear, or if they did they ignored the fact with a singular reticence—a reticence which to the three men seemed more alarming, even, than direct attack. When at last, arrived before the great front door, which they could see was not bolted, the little Frenchman whispered to Alan that they should first explore each room before they left, he but voiced the thoughts of both the others.

Moving towards a door upon the right he turned the handle, and cautiously they entered

into a spacious room, sumptuously but significantly furnished, for although the rugs upon the floor were thick and costly, autocratic faces gazed imperiously down at them from ancestral portraits on the walls, and wonderful Eastern vases vied with each other in a rivalry of taste and pricelessness; the furniture itself was hidden from sight by dust-protecting covers of a dingy grey, and as he grasped this fact a sudden light leapt into the eyes of the little Frenchman. He turned at once to his English colleague, and they nodded understandingly.

Without a word they turned from the room and moved towards a door directly opposite the stairs leading to the servants' quarters. Duprès thrust this open, and Alan, close upon his heels, saw that they had entered what appeared to be a butler's pan[redacted] but even as he realised this fact, a strangled cry from Ferrers made him swing round in alarm. For the second time that day Alan's eyes were startled by the sight of a man lying, apparently lifeless, upon the ground.

This time, however, the lifelessness was only apparent, for as the three men bent down beside him and removed with eager fingers the gag that guarded his mouth and the tightly-drawn cords which prevented any movement, they could see that, despite his

frightful pallor, this man was not dead ; under his hand Alan could feel the exhausted heart-beats of a weak old man. For the man was old, as his white hairs bore witness, and it was with a contemptuous anger burning fiercely within him that Alan noticed the terrible bruise upon the back of his head.

From his pocket Ferrers had produced a flask of brandy, and in a very little while, after forcing some drops between the bluish lips, the old man's eyelids flickered and then opened wide, a look of terror leaping to his face as he saw the three men grouped about him. A few hurried words from the little Frenchman quickly reassured him, and quite soon he was sufficiently recovered to be able to speak.

He was alone in the house, he told them, his master [illegible] away for a month or two, and that afternoon a knock had come to the front door. As soon as he opened it two men, wearing masks, had entered hurriedly, and before he could resist had knocked him down with such force that he had remained unconscious up to that moment. They had come in a private car, which was waiting by the kerb, but that was all that he had noticed.

It was obviously an effort for the old man to speak, and as soon as he had finished Duprès rose hastily to his feet.

"Inspector Ferrers," he said, "Mr. Grahame had better come along with me back to the Sûreté, and I'll have a doctor and some of our men sent here. As soon as they come you can rejoin us."

Ferrers consented at once, and in another five minutes the two had let themselves out of the house and were walking quickly along the street.

Arrived at the Sûreté, Duprès gave a few brisk orders, and then, going to his private office, he called for certain files, over which he pored with an abstraction which Alan found distinctly provoking. It was not until a discreet tap at the door heralded the entrance of Inspector Ferrers that the little Frenchman swung round.

"Well, I've found out who your friend Jean Cadiste really was, Mr. Grahame," he said, "and a lot more besides. I'll just give you a few details to allay your curiosity."

He smiled mischievously; Alan's impatience as he had conned those files had been only too obvious.

He paused, and when he spoke again his voice was very grave:

"That furnished house we've just come from," he said, "was tenanted three months ago by the Marquis de Fevril-le-Bois . . . yes, the owner of that locket. A certain

happening about that date caused the Marquis to dislike the place intensely and he gave it up. That happening was the mysterious robbery of every bit of his jewellery and silver, a collection valued at over three hundred thousand pounds. The jewellery was usually kept in the bank, but twice a year it was the Marquis's custom to send for them in order to examine and finger each article . . . he loved them, you see. The butler was then instructed to pack the jewels up again and return them to the bank.

" On the twenty-fifth of March this year the butler—a man known as Jules Severne, in reality no other than your friend Jean Cadiste —departed to his pantry with the jewels and silver, some of which he had to clean before returning them to the bank. He had been in the Marquis's employ for about six months and was entirely trusted. The cleaning should have taken about an hour at the most, but at the end of that time the butler failed to appear, and when at length his master went in search of him he found the man tied up, gagged, and . . . the jewels and silver missing. They have never been found to this day . . . never to this day," repeated the little Frenchman, slipping the golden locket from his case and regarding it almost lovingly, " excepting this."

" And the butler ? " broke in Alan eagerly.

"Was suspected, of course," went on Duprès slowly, "only they could prove nothing against him . . . for the jewels were most certainly not concealed about him. They had vanished . . . vanished absolutely. He told the usual tale—that two men had jumped out at him when he was going through the hall and had knocked him down, only—the ropes were not tied quite tightly enough, and the Marquis dismissed him at once."

"And Johan Cohen's gang were waiting for him," put in Alan thoughtfully.

Duprès nodded.

"That's it," he said. "Of course he was really a member of their gang, and he'd decided to double-cross them. It was just a bit of bad luck for Cadiste."

But Alan shook his head dubiously.

"I wonder . . ." he mu[illegible]ed, and his tone was doubtful. "I suppose they'd got him outside in that car, and when they'd quietened the old man they got him to show them the secret door and then killed him."

Duprès was thoughtful for a moment, and then almost an admiring smile came to his lips.

"He was a clever little devil, though," he added; "he must have been arranging for it for months . . . cut out that door in the wall and discovered the excellent hiding-place . . .

the cellar of the house next door, that house which was always vacant. As soon as he got the jewels he must have darted up the stairs to that cupboard, entered the other house and taken them down to those cases filled with straw. It wouldn't take him long to get back again and tie himself up with rope. He probably relied upon being dismissed, anyway, and then he could return a few months later to the house, let himself in with his key, get in next door and remove the jewels. An ingenious rogue . . . but not ingenious enough for the Cohen gang."

"No—they're a pretty villainous crew," assented Alan quickly, and as he spoke a curiously unpleasant premonition of impending evil made him shiver suddenly, but the next moment he thrust the thought aside.

And then he yawned.

Duprès laughed and glanced across at John Ferrers, who had echoed his yawn. The Frenchman glanced at his watch and then he rose to his feet.

"You're tired," he said, "and so is Inspector Ferrers. I think we'd better adjourn for to-night. It's pretty late, anyway, and we've found out a good deal. I hope we shall get Johan Cohen on two counts now—murder and robbery."

Alan was about to answer when the telephone

upon Duprès' desk rang with a sudden shrillness which was almost startling, so unexpected was it at that hour of night. The three men exchanged a rapid glance, and then Duprès lifted the receiver.

"Hallo!" he said. "Yes—this is Inspector Duprès speaking. Right, put it through."

Turning to the two eager men beside him he murmured softly:

"Call from London—Scotland Yard."

In a second all the tiredness fell from Alan and John Ferrers like a garment that was now outworn; in a silence brimful of suspense they waited for the conversation to be resumed.

"Yes . . . yes, he's here," Duprès was saying. "Right—I'll put him through."

He turned to Alan.

"Inspector Cardew wants you."

Alan grasped the receiver excitedly.

"Hallo!" he said. "Anything happened?"

From the other end of the wire came a laconic voice.

"Oh, no. I just rang up to know how you are getting on. To make sure you're safe."

Alan nearly dropped the receiver in his disappointment.

"Awfully nice of you," he stammered, "but . . . but was that all?"

And then Cardew's laugh came cheerily over the wire.

"Well, no—not quite all. I want you and Ferrers to go straight to Freeth first thing to-morrow—put the wind-up to that little village, and then come back here. You were quite right about it, you know. They're a pretty tough gang. We've found out a lot about them—at least Miss Grange has."

"Shirley?" cried Alan in agitation. "What in heaven's name has she got to do with it? I told her to go straight back home."

Again the other laughed.

"Not a very obedient young woman, I'm afraid. But don't worry, old chap; she's at home all right now. I sent a constable with her an hour or so ago when she left the Yard . . ."

"An hour or so ago? . . . But she left with me," interrupted Alan perplexedly.

"Yes, yes, I know," said Cardew soothingly. "But she called again—to give an account of her evening's work. You're a lucky man, Alan. A very plucky and resourceful young lady, that. . . . But put me on to Ferrers now, please. I want to give him instructions for to-morrow. I'll speak to you again afterwards."

Very reluctantly Alan surrendered the wire.

SHIRLEY GRANGE had little difficulty in shadowing the fast-moving figure of Johan Cohen, for without pausing for a moment or casting the most fleeting glance around he walked briskly down Bond Street, along Piccadilly, across the road and into the quiet spaciousness of St. James's Street. Into one of the most exclusive of clubs Shirley saw him enter ; and again a doubt came to her whether or no this were in very truth the right person she was shadowing and not some aristocratic and impeccable double of the man who was known as Johan Cohen. The doubt, however, was only momentary : Alan's conviction had been too absolute to admit of mistake, and so, taking care to remain unobserved from any of the windows of the club which he had entered, Shirley proceeded to wait until the man should reappear. A long, dreary vigil it proved to be, for two hours had crawled leisurely by before the little figure again emerged through those venerable doors and moved swiftly in the direction of Piccadilly.

With a quick relief after the long tedium of waiting, Shirley hastened to follow, and entering into Piccadilly she was just in time to see

him hail a taxi. A moment of panic came to her—a panic, however, which was but short-lived, for at once she caught sight of a taxi rank upon her right. In a very little time she was inside a cab and in quick pursuit of that taken by Johan Cohen, having given her driver hasty instructions to keep the other taxi in sight but without attracting any suspicion.

At first the chase was easy enough while they drove through the crowded London streets, but gradually the traffic became less, the shops gave place to little suburban villas and then to fields, and still the other car drove steadily on. It was now but a black speck in the shadowy distance, for in such rural surroundings too short an interval might have provoked comment. Eagerly Shirley leant forward and stared out at the passing fields, hoping to locate her whereabouts, but without success, and sinking back again on to the cushioned seat she allowed her thoughts to play mischievously with the possible anxiety of a certain young man could he but see her at that moment, and again that rebellious twinkle leapt into her eyes.

The sudden lurch as the taxi was swung rapidly around a corner jolted her from her thoughts, and the next moment she realised that it had stopped. A second later the driver opened the door.

" The other car has stopped, miss," he said, and there was a note of pleased excitement in his voice ; obviously this unusual pursuit was much to his liking. " So I turned up this road at once, so as not to be seen."

" Splendid ! " cried Shirley. " Wait here a moment."

Darting out of the car she sped up to the turning of the road and peered cautiously around. Even as she did so a sudden noise made her cower back against the hedge, as the taxi they had been following drove rapidly past in the direction from which they had just come. Puzzled and a little fearful lest their shadowing had been observed, Shirley peered again around the hedge, and then excitement seized her. For although it was now close on nine o'clock and the day was fast giving place to night, through the shadows ahead she could see a little figure walking briskly along the road with that firm, unhesitating stride with which she was now so familiar. On the instant she sped back to her driver.

" Wait here for me," she said hurriedly. " I don't know how long I shall be . . . but wait all the same. If I'm not back by midnight go to Scotland Yard, give this to Inspector Cardew and tell him where you left me."

Quickly she handed him a card from her bag, and then, without heeding the glance of interest and surprise which had leapt to the other's eyes, she darted back to the turning and on to the main road once more. Eagerly she looked around for the figure . . . and then her heart sank miserably, for it was nowhere to be seen. Now she began to run, her eyes still fixed upon the distance ahead, praying that at any moment she might see the man again. But there was not a soul about—only fields and one or two scattered houses, and despair clutched at her heart as she realised how possible it was that he had entered into one of these.

Suddenly, branching off the main road on the left, Shirley saw what seemed to be merely a cart-track, and yet as her eyes noted it hope revived in her once more. For it was surely somewhere quite near here that Johan Cohen had vanished. Along the narrow path she ran, her feet making little noise upon the hardened ground, and as she did so a sound of running water came softly to her ears. A few minutes later she had reached the end of the track and the sound was at once explained . . . for the river, black and mysterious in the fading light, stretched windingly before her. Even as she realised this fact another sound—the gentle lapping of water upon the oars of a

boat—filled her mind with a sudden comprehension. So this was the reason why that taxi had been dismissed: Johan Cohen preferred to finish his journey by boat. Very faintly she could see it, a deeper smudge in the greyness ahead; very softly she could hear the swishing of the oars as they parted the water. On the instant her mind was made up. Johan Cohen should not escape her thus; happen what may she would track him to his lair. Running swiftly along the bank, she was easily able to keep the moving boat in sight, for the man it carried was no speedy rower.

Five minutes passed in this fashion, and then the river wound round in a sudden sharp bend. Quickly Shirley darted round a clump of trees . . . and then she stood stock-still and a sick fear clutched at her heart lest she had been seen. For before her, less than twenty yards away, ghostly and impalpable in the gathering dark, floated a stately house-boat, up whose shapely side a little short figure was clambering by means of a dangling rope-ladder held by a man above. Frantically Shirley darted to the ground in the shadow of some bushes and lay there shaking in every limb, trembling with a strange, indefinable terror—a terror of that mysterious boat floating so aloofly in this lonely portion of the Thames. When at last she had nerved herself

to lift her head once more a great thankfulness filled her heart, for no one was about; obviously she must have been unobserved. Again she stared at the boat, and now she saw that the two figures had vanished, but the rope still dangled at the side to which was tethered that little rowing-boat.

Five minutes passed . . . ten . . . and still she saw no movement on the boat and heard no sound; only a tiny chink of light streaming from beneath a shuttered window a few feet from the rope denoted human occupancy, and as the night mists deepened its shape became even more vague, more indeterminate. Then suddenly a daring thought came to Shirley Grange, a great longing to peer just once through that tiny crack beneath the wooden shutter and see what mischief was afoot. For that it was mischief, and of an evil kind, which was being fostered in this boat the girl felt quite convinced. Creeping cautiously from her hiding-place beneath the bushes she stared around, but no one was visible, and letting herself down as noiselessly as possible into the water she began to swim swiftly towards the boat, towards that tiny chink of light which flickered from it. The girl was good in the water—had been from childhood—and when she had approached within a dangerous distance of that floating

craft she took a deep breath, made a swift calculation, and then proceeded to swim underneath the water, emerging only when she was actually hidden by the shadows of its side. Very cautiously, very silently she raised herself up three rungs of that dangling rope-ladder, and then, stretching slightly to one side, she was able to reach the level of the chink of light beneath that shutter.

With wildly-pounding heart and leaping pulse Shirley set her eye to the crack . . . and exultation seized her. For she was staring into a comfortable, large-sized cabin, at a table around which were seated several men, all listening with a rapt attention to the little man she knew as Johan Cohen. They were a villainous-looking crew, with restless eyes and reckless bearing, and as she glanced from face to face it was with difficulty that Shirley managed to restrain a cry. For two of the faces were familiar to her ; she had seen these men herself in that sinister village of Freeth. But the words of Johan Cohen, somewhat muffled yet audible enough to her eager ears, thrust all thought of these men from her mind. With a growing horror she gradually understood the true purpose of this boat, floating so tranquilly in the lonely stretches of the Thames. With a startled thrill she realised the tremendous secret she had stumbled upon

through her shadowing of that night . . . for here in very truth must be the headquarters of a gang.

" The two Van Cronoons, the wealthy Americans, are going to be there," Johan Cohen was saying. " Mrs. Van Cronoon is sure to be ablaze with jewels—she labours under the piteous belief that the way to high society is paved with costly gems. We must profit by such strange *naïveté*. When she calls for her carriage you, Simonds, will be her chauffeur. Her own you will have previously removed . . ."

" Alone, sir ? "

One of the men, a frail-looking individual, had spoken anxiously, and Johan Cohen shook his head in contempt.

" No, not alone, Simonds. You're scarcely the build for such removals. Benson will help you—you will drive the lady and her husband as far as Richmond—Benson following in another car—and just out of the town you will stop, wait for Benson to approach and relieve them both of any valuables. You will then leave them tied up by the roadside, avoiding any unnecessary violence. That is quite clear ? "

The reply came at once.

" Quite, sir."

" Right," said Johan Cohen. " Well, any news for me ? "

With his question a somewhat awkward silence entered the cabin. The men shifted uneasily on nervous feet, and at last one of them stepped forward hesitatingly, his manner full of deprecation.

"I . . . I'm very sorry, sir," he said, "but . . . well, in the Somers affair yesterday we, unfortunately, had an accident."

Fury had leapt into the face of Johan Cohen, but his voice was icy as he answered:

"You fools! Where've you put him?"

"In the locker, sir," replied the other hastily. "It's a bullet wound, sir, and we daren't risk throwing him into the river . . . we thought, perhaps, you could take him along to Freeth."

"Fetch him out," ordered Cohen coldly.

On the instant the men moved over to a locker in the right-hand corner of the cabin, turned a key quickly in the lock, and lifting up the cover drew out the body of a young man in the early twenties. He was wearing evening dress and down the crumpled front of his white shirt ran a sinister scarlet stain. Unconcernedly, contemptuously almost, Johan Cohen walked over to the recumbent figure, bent down and stared at it thoughtfully. Then, straightening up, he turned sharply to the men before him.

"Put him in the motor-boat," he said

curtly. "I'll take him along with me to-night. But, remember"—and as he spoke his voice had assumed an evil, menacing ring—"these accidents have got to stop. There have been far too many 'suicides' lately along this river—the papers are beginning to comment on them. They've got to stop. D'you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

The answer came in sullen chorus, and at a signal from their leader, two of the men seized the silent figure and bore it swiftly from the room. Johan Cohen turned at once to the others gathered round the table.

"Who was the . . . er . . . originator of that accident?" he asked, and his voice was felinely silky.

After a moment's hesitation the one who had informed Cohen of the fact admitted responsibility.

Johan Cohen smiled, and the sight was not a pleasing one.

"And who made necessary the last 'suicide'?" he questioned sauvely.

Another man stepped forward, and again that unpleasant mirthless smile parted Cohen's lips.

"So," he said. "Well, my friends, I am going to punish you. The next two or, possibly, three months of your lives shall be spent in prison."

" Prison ? "

The word burst spontaneously from both mens' lips.

Johan Cohen nodded.

" For some time," he said, " I have been evolving a plan to rob Croswell's, the jewellers, of Grafton Street. Without sacrificing two of my men I cannot satisfactorily arrange it. However, I think it will be a good lesson to you both to cool your heels in gaol . . . there will be fewer accidents afterwards, I hope."

He laughed suddenly, a harsh, grating laugh, yet one in which there was an element of puckish humour.

" How very useful prisons are," he said, as though he were merely speaking to himself, " if only as a corrective against unskilful work."

Anxiety was written large upon the faces of the two unfortunates, and suddenly the first one spoke :

" What . . . what do you intend to do, sir ? " he asked, falteringly.

Cohen looked at him in silence for a moment, and then :

" This," he said, and his voice became charged with an imperious command. " To-morrow afternoon, at the stroke of half-past four precisely, you two will break open the window of Santalie's . . ."

" *Santalie's ?* "

One of the men had spoken quickly and his voice was full of astonishment.

Johan Cohen frowned.

" Don't interrupt when I am giving you orders," he answered curtly. " This raid is in the nature of a blind while the real work is being done elsewhere. I picked on Santalie's for the very good reason that you can take as long as you like there without being interfered with. I have already warned the manager what to expect. You will seize what you can and make off in a car. You will not be too clever nor too hasty, so that the attention of the police should be centred upon your strange activities. You will lead them a chase up the street, but manage to get caught, so that you become the sensation of Bond Street at that time. Is that clear ? "

" Yes, sir," came sullenly from the two men before him.

" Meanwhile," continued Cohen smoothly, turning to the others grouped around, " I shall want four of you—Jenkins, Roberts, Smith and Benson—oh, no, you're on the other job at night . . . Barnes will do—I shall want you four to break into Croswell's just around the corner in Grafton Street. There is a pearl necklace priced at ten thousand, an emerald bracelet and a solitaire diamond ring all

mounted together in a tray to the right of the window. You will seize those in particular, and, if propitious, whatever else you can lay your hands upon, and then jump back into your car and dash back here. I will come for them at ten to-morrow night. You will take the Bentley. Is that quite clear ? "

" Yes, sir."

There was no surprise, no smallest hint of a suggestion that the order was unusual : all the men accepted it as a matter of course—as, indeed, an ordinary part of their daily routine.

" And you," added Cohen, turning back to the two he had singled out, " will receive what punishment the law considers fits your case. Have the boat started up."

The last remark was spoken in a brisk, businesslike tone, and with it the interview was over.

" Very good, sir," muttered both the men, and hastily they made their exit.

On the instant Shirley Grange slipped her numbed fingers from the rungs of the ladder, and letting herself down gently into the water, she swam swiftly underneath the surface until she had placed a fair distance between herself and the floating house-boat. Her limbs were stiff and chilled, and fear seized her lest cramp should grip them before she reached the

bank. A greater fear, however, spurred her on, and even as she reached the bank and climbed painfully up it and under the shelter of the bushes, she heard the sound of an engine churning the water. Peering into the darkness, beyond the black mass that was the house-boat, she could see the light at the back of a motor-boat as it sped swiftly up the river towards the sea—a motor-boat which, she realised, must have been lying upon the other side of the bulkier craft.

But now the terror in her soul swept all other thoughts away, and leaving the shelter of the bushes Shirley began to run frantically along the shore towards that cattle-track near which she hoped to find her taxi. As she ran she sobbed, for ever before her mind she saw that sinister streak of red showing so grimly on the shirt of the murdered man.

THE TREASURE NETS CHAPTER VII

A STRONG wind was blowing among the blossom-laden trees of Freeth, a wind which that morning had been no friend to Alan Grahame, for the crossing by air from France had been extremely bumpy. It clattered the shutters of the little cottages, flecking with white the tumbling waves, when

he stared down again from his vantage-point upon the cliff before it, at that tiny harbour which he had first seen but a very few days before. This time, however, he had not come alone, for crouched down among the gorse-bushes on either side lay hidden John Ferrers and his colleague Jules Duprès.

All three were in a state of excitement, their heads turning automatically at the slightest sound from contemplation of the village below towards the broad high-road that stretched behind them, their eyes filled with an eager expectation. They were waiting for something, listening for the crisp crunching of wheels on the gravel-laid road, for the unmistakable purring of a motor-car engine.

At last they heard it. Very faintly in the distance at first, but increasing in volume with every moment, came that whirring drone of an approaching car. Prone upon the ground all three wriggled cautiously back from the side of the cliff until they were concealed from view of the village below, and then rising to their feet, they moved quickly up the road in the direction of the car. Rapidly it came into sight, and drawing up beside them, stopped instantly. From it descended six men attired in the loose trousers and woollen jerseys of fisher-folk.

One of the men, short, thick-set and

authoritative, stepped forward briskly towards the three who had approached.

" My name is Moran," he said. " Which of you three gentlemen is Inspector Ferrers ? "

At once the latter stepped forward, and the two men shook hands. Swiftly Ferrers introduced his companions.

" You've come in good time, Inspector," he said. " We've only been here a little while ourselves. The wind delayed us in crossing and we were half an hour late. But surely these aren't all the men ? "

The other shook his head.

" No, there's another car coming along directly . . . only we had some difficulty in rigging them all up in fishermen's clothes. Ever since you phoned this morning we've been scouring the place for dark woollen jerseys."

Ferrers laughed.

" I was afraid you'd have a difficulty," he said. " But that was Mr. Grahame's idea."

" It's the best way to avoid detection," broke in Alan eagerly. " From a distance you'd all pass as fishermen from the village."

" Good," said the Inspector. " Well, now we'd better proceed."

He turned to his men.

" You all know your instructions—break up into ones and twos and approach the

village so that you entirely surround it. Keep your distance though, and remain out of sight as much as possible. When these three gentlemen walk up to the inn, that's your signal to come forward and get to work. All the men are to be made prisoners . . . not one must escape . . . every cottage must be guarded. Is that quite clear ? ''

There came unanimous assent, and Moran nodded his head.

'' Very well,'' he said. '' Now, do your best.'

Immediately the six men separated from each other and slipped from sight among the gorse-bushes that edged the cliff. Alan wriggled back to the bushes he had but lately left, and, raising himself upon one elbow, he stared down excitedly in the direction in which they had gone. But he saw nothing—nothing except, perhaps, the sudden spasmodic shivering of a bush as though some alien presence had trodden near it. Fortunately the whole side of the cliff was covered with gorse and brambles which, short though they were, yet provided ample shelter for a hidden man. Another contingent had now arrived, and yet another, and excitement ran like fever in his veins, as Alan noted how cautious was their manner of approach, how imperceptible their shadowing. Here and there he could see a

blue-clad figure lounging smoking in the sun, and at that distance it was impossible for him to be certain that these were, indeed, the bogus fisher-folk. Impossible to be certain, yet in his mind Alan had little doubt, for from his observation of the fishermen of Freeth, during those two days in which he lived there, all of their mornings seemed to have been spent within their cottage doors . . . and from the soft purring of a machine which had come, sometimes, vaguely to his ears, Alan had been convinced that it was not only the mending of fishing-nets that had so engrossed them.

A rustle by his side made Alan look up quickly. Ferrers was crouched down beside him, Duprès close behind—the other Inspector was nowhere to be seen.

" Moran has followed the last of his men," whispered Ferrers urgently. " It's time for us to go. All set ? . . . Remember—there must be no concealment about us—we're not dressed for the part. Let's go."

All three wriggled back to the main road, and then, rising, proceeded to walk swiftly down the hill. Suddenly Ferrers glanced at Alan.

" For heaven's sake look a bit more casual about it," he protested. " You look as full of business as the Stock Exchange."

Alan laughed, stopped a moment and with

shaking fingers lit a cigarette; when he resumed his walk his step was much more leisurely, much less precipitate. In a silence pregnant with tumultuous thoughts the three men walked, with forced slowness, down the hill and along the path leading to that main road between the cottages, at the end of which lay the Olde Shippe Inne. The village was very quiet on this windy summer day—a quietness almost of suspense—but Alan recognised the tenseness as one which seemed habitual to it. A couple of fishermen mending nets on the beach stared curiously at them as they strolled along, but no one questioned their coming. As they passed those cottages so bare of any womanly ornament Alan's mask of easy unconcern slipped from him for a moment as he heard the faint, muffled droning of a hidden machine, and turning to his companions he nodded towards them meaningly.

They had arrived before the wide stone steps leading to the Olde Shippe Inne, and with one accord they halted. The right hands of all three men fled to their pockets, closing at once upon the cold steel of a gun. Then, with a purposeful stride Alan mounted the steps, his companions at his heels, and walked into the inn.

This was the signal for the others to appear, and even as he did so Alan's sensitive ears

caught a sudden significant scrunching of the shingle, heard the quick staccato tones of excited men. Suddenly a bullet shattered the uneasy silence that brooded over Freeth, and on the instant there was turmoil. A glance of quick comprehension passed between the three. Moran's men must be already firing at the boats upon the beach, forbidding all possibility of escape by sea.

Within the stately precincts of the Olde Shippe Inne the peaceful atmosphere was rudely shattered. Simultaneously, even as the three men entered within, even as that first bullet zipped through the silence, a door at the end of the spacious hall was thrust agitatedly open and James Macrae, with red face and staring eyes, darted towards them.

"What is it? Who fired that shot?" he gasped.

Even as he spoke he caught sight of Alan, and he stopped at once. A look of fear leapt into his eyes.

"My men," said Ferrers curtly.

Suddenly his right hand darted from his pocket.

"Hands up, Macrae," he said. "You're under arrest."

The fear in the other's eyes increased instantaneously, but he forced an uneasy laugh.

"Arrest?" he said. "Arrest? What the hell are you talking about? What's the charge?"

"Being concerned in the murder of a man named Jean Cadiste is enough to begin with," said Ferrers calmly, "and . . . stop him, you fellows."

The last words were shouted, for when he had named the dead man terror had replaced the fear in the eyes of James Macrae, and with a quick movement he darted back to the door through which he had come, slamming it behind him.

On the instant the three were before it . . . but the door was locked. Realising that to break it down would take some precious time, during which any others there might be within the inn would be able to escape, the three men turned towards the other rooms, and in a very little while they had handcuffed two men whom they had taken by surprise. There was, however, still no sign of the worthy innkeeper. All the upstairs rooms had been thoroughly examined, but with no result.

And then a sudden memory of that terrible hour when, prone upon the red tiles of the roof, he had gazed down through an iron ventilator and seen a man tortured grievously within a secret room returned forcibly to Alan, and turning to Ferrers he burst out quickly:

" The secret room. That's where he's gone. Come along—let's get to the roof."

Dashing up the stairs he led the way to the room which he himself had occupied a little while before. Out of the window they clambered, and on to the roof, moving quickly along its tiles to the tiny iron grille. Prone upon the roof they stared into the darkness of the secret room.

At first, accustomed as were their eyes to the brilliant sunshine of the day, they could discern nothing, but gradually the black became grey and then merged into distinct outline. . . . and with a throb of triumph Alan saw that upon the trestle-bed there lay a figure.

" He's there—on the bed," he cried out eagerly.

The other shook his head.

" That's not the innkeeper," he muttered. " It's far too small."

But already doubt had come to Alan Grahame, and with it the dawning of a terrible, an incredible suspicion. There was something unmistakably familiar about that figure lying so still upon the narrow bed, something which sent a sick horror through the watching man.

" No," he murmured harshly, and his voice sounded strangely in his ears. " No—that's not the innkeeper . . . it . . . it's a girl . . .

it's . . . my God, Ferrers . . . it is . . . it's Shirley herself . . . Shirley Grange."

Even as he cried her name, the girl upon the bed lifted herself awkwardly on her elbows —her hands and feet were bound around with rope—and stared up at the tiny iron grille.

" Alan," she cried, and there was so much joy, so much relief and unhoped-for deliverance in her voice that Ferrers bit his lip. Only release from an absolute despair could have provoked such a cry.

Almost simultaneously, even as the cry left her lips, a door in the wall was flung open, and the little innkeeper, his mouth and hands working convulsively, his body crouched as though to spring, rage and fear burning in his eyes, hurled himself into the room and up to the prostrate girl.

" You'll cry out, will you ? Cry out and let them get me after all ? You dirty spy, I'll soon settle that . . . I'll break every bone in your damned neck. I'll . . ."

As he spoke, his hands, strong and determined, were already pressing upon her throat, and covering up her mouth.

Shirley tried to open it to scream, but even as she struggled a bullet, skilfully aimed from above, struck the crouching figure upon her, and with a groan the man's right arm fell helpless to his side.

"Lay your finger on her again and you'll get another through your head," yelled Alan furiously. "My aim is pretty good. Just try it and see."

The man appeared indisposed, however, to test his claim to marksmanship. Frantically he glanced up at the tiny ventilator in the roof where the steel of an automatic gleamed wickedly above him, and then, with a sudden movement, he made for the door.

But Ferrers spoke rapidly:

"Stand where you are," he yelled. "We'll come down and fetch you. How d'you get to that room?"

Realising that resistance would provoke another bullet, the man stood where he was and gave the requisite directions.

"You wait here and keep him covered," muttered Ferrers to Alan, and, patting him reassuringly on the back, he made his way swiftly along the roof towards that open window.

Half an hour later Shirley Grange, still white and shaking, but reviving rapidly under the combined influence of brandy and Alan's companionship, was able to explain her presence in that room.

"After I left the Yard last night," she said, "I . . . I felt all worked up . . . tremendously excited, and when I got back home the

thought of bed was torture to me—such a tame ending to a thrilling day. Then suddenly I remembered that Inspector Cardew had said he was going to tell you to go to Freeth straight from Paris, and I thought about that corpse and wondered why Cohen was taking it to Freeth; and suddenly the idea came to me to catch the midnight train to Exmouth, hire a car from there and be here when you came. It seemed such a marvellous idea at the time. It . . . it *was* pretty good, wasn't it, darling?"

Alan smiled.

"Oh, very," he said gently, "so devoid of any risk . . . so safe . . . so . . ."

"Oh, yes, yes, I know all that—but it's just because it was the tiniest bit dangerous. . . ."

"Just the tiniest bit . . ." repeated Alan ironically.

". . . That I wanted to come," went on the girl, quite unabashed. "I got to Exmouth early in the morning and got a lift as far as Marilow. I walked from there. I meant to be cautious, careful not to be seen, and all that, but as soon as I got to the top of the cliff I saw that something very strange was happening in Freeth. There was a funeral going on . . ."

"A funeral?" broke in Alan in surprise.

Shirley nodded.

"You know there's a church at the bottom

of the hill. . . . I'd never really noticed it much before. The bell was tolling—it was all quite public and the parson was all in black . . ."

" The parson ? "

" Yes. I've seen him in fisherman's clothes before, but he really looked so much the part that I believe he is one—defrocked, most likely. They'd got flowers on the coffin and it was buried in the churchyard. Everything was done so openly that I felt it couldn't be the man I saw . . ."

" The man you saw ? " put in Alan blankly.

"Yes. You know, the body in the houseboat."

Alan's mind flew back to that telephone conversation he had had with Inspector Cardew in Paris, and he stared at her aghast ; the daring possibility of a public burial for the victim of this gang did not seem credible. But the girl continued :

" I went to the churchyard when everyone had gone, and looked for a tombstone, but there wasn't one. . . . And then Macrae came along, accused me of spying, and clapped me into that room."

" I see," said Alan thoughtfully. " I see. I'm beginning to understand quite a lot about this devil's gang. High up among the untouchables—a member of the most exclusive London clubs—he's a pretty smart fellow, is this Johan Cohen."

"You're sure they've caught them all?" asked Shirley anxiously. "You know, Alan, if one man escapes he'll be able to send him word."

Alan smiled reassuringly.

"No one's escaped, Shirley, darling. Moran's men have done their work too well. We've got the lot, all tied up in the parlour below. And we've found out a good deal, too. I was right about the village: the fishing's nothing but a blind—it's just a receiving-station for stolen jewels. Every cottage is fitted up with special machinery—a vat to melt the gold; tools to weave it into different shapes; special casts and moulds; instruments for chain- and ring-making, enamelling, gilding and polishing; the whole affair's been done on a grand scale. Probably those fishermen we saw lounging about on the beach happen to be the world's most skilful goldsmiths and craftsmen, and I bet they were well paid for their work. Duprès has recognised a whole case of things on which the men were working this morning as the jewels stolen from the house of the Marquis de Fevril-le-Bois three months ago. Some of the things were already too much altered, though."

"Why? What do you think they do with them . . . when they are altered, I mean?"

"Wrap them up in cotton-wool, place them in boxes—we found a lot of both—and send,

or more probably take, them to some shop where they sell them as new jewels. Don't you see the possibilities of it, Shirley? Jewels stolen in France could be brought here immediately, altered at once and taken to Bond Street, probably to Santalie's. You remember what you heard Cohen say about warning the manager. That's probably their shop, and . . . why, what's the matter?"

For Shirley had risen to her feet in sudden excitement.

"Santalie's. There's another in the Rue de la Paix," she burst out eagerly. "Don't you see —they own the two. Sell the French jewels in England and the English in France . . ."

"And as soon as they're stolen they're taken out of the country they belong to, rushed to Freeth, altered at once and . . ."

"Probably the whole thing only takes, perhaps, forty-eight hours."

Alan shook his head.

"Hardly that. They couldn't get them to England or across to France so soon."

"Oh, couldn't they?" put in Shirley quickly. "Well, they got those jewels across from Paris last night . . . and that body from the Thames—for I'll bet it was the one I saw in that house-boat all right."

"So they did!"

Alan whistled softly to himself.

" There's a genius at the back of all this—a relentless genius. Poor Jean Cadiste—what an optimistic fool he was to think he could get away with double-crossing Johan Cohen. He put him in the way of getting those jewels and the poor loon thought he'd keep them for himself. Yes, he's a pretty relentless scoundrel. But what an audacious one! Just think, Shirley, he was quite prepared to let those two men go to prison for a few months as a mark of his displeasure. He didn't seem to fear that they'd turn King's evidence on him—and I don't suppose for a moment they would. No one would believe them if they did. Who would believe it of a man of his standing? I don't suppose he's left the slightest proof of the way he earns his living. I tell you, Shirley, the man's above suspicion. But "—and his voice grew very grave, very determined—" but they'll get him to-night . . . they'll get Johan Cohen to-night. When he visits that house-boat on the Thames he'll find that Jimmy Cardew's men will be waiting there to greet him."

The girl nodded thoughtfully.

" Yes . . . but we shan't be there to see it," she said, and dejection was in her tone.

Alan looked at her quickly and his eyes lit up with the dawn of an idea. He glanced swiftly at his watch and then rose to his feet.

" Come on," he said eagerly. " We're going to be there. I wouldn't miss it for a thousand pounds. When Johan Cohen comes to the house-boat to-night you and I will be there to see him."

Shirley, also, had jumped to her feet, but her smile was perplexed.

" But how ? We can't . . ."

" We can fly," cried Alan gaily. " We'll be back in heaps of time for the appointment. Come along ! "

They were hastening jubilantly from the room when Ferrers, who was just about to enter, met them at the door.

" I'm sorry to worry you, Miss Grange," he said, quietly. " but if you could spare a minute . . ."

" Not a minute . . . not a second, even," broke in Alan briskly. " And neither can you, old chap. We're going back to that aerodrome where we landed this morning, and we're flying forthwith to London. Remember that appointment we've got with Johan Cohen ? Get Duprès and come along at once."

Ferrers smiled happily.

" Right," he said. " I'll get him immediately . . . only, well, it wouldn't take a moment, and it's rather important. Moran's just discovered a new grave in the churchyard, dug it up, and they want Miss Grange's

testimony whether the corpse is that of the man she saw on the houseboat or not. It's a very unpleasant business I know, Miss Grange, but you're the only one . . ."

"All right," interrupted Shirley quickly. "I'll come at once."

But her face was very pale, and as she spoke her voice had trembled. Without a word Alan slipped his hand comfortingly over hers as they moved from the room.

THE TREASURE NETS CHAPTER VIII

A SOFT rain was falling in a steady drizzle, increasing the greyness of the river mists that hung like impenetrable veils about the mysterious house-boat floating so quietly in that lonely portion of the Thames. It was a dark, overcast night, lightened by no moon, a comfortless night, and more than one of the watchers—of which there were many—hidden along the bank, shivered inwardly, a shiver which was only in part prompted by excitement. They had been watching a long time now, for it was many hours ago since Cohen's men had made that impudent raid upon the jeweller's shop in Grafton Street, many hours since, taking every precaution to remain unperceived, certain police-officers, who had

observed the raid with benign passiveness, had followed the marauders to their lair upon the river.

Everything had gone excellently, both from the point of view of Cohen's men and from that of the police-officers themselves. The two unfortunates to whom had fallen the job of making a covering raid upon Santalie's of Bond Street had been duly seized and consigned to prison. Santalie's itself was due for immediate attention as soon as Cohen was caught, while the Paris Sûreté had been informed by Jules Duprès, and was about to pay a lightning visit to the other Santalie in the Rue de la Paix. Croswells themselves had been warned of the raid, but ordered not to interfere in any way, merely taking the precaution, however, of substituting dummy jewels for the valuables in the windows. The attack on the Van Cronoons had been successfully thwarted, and the two men, Benson and Simonds, were now cooling their heels in gaol, utterly dumbfounded at the failure of their venture.

All had proceeded according to plan, and Inspector Cardew was well content. There was a pleased smile on his face as he turned to Shirley, who crouched behind him, Alan close at her side.

" I hope you're not getting too wet, Miss

Grange," he whispered. "He shouldn't be long now, though. It's a few minutes to ten."

The girl gave a sudden shiver.

"Cold?" murmured Alan swiftly.

She shook her head.

"No; it's only that I'm so excited I feel quite ill about it. I shall get up and scream if he doesn't come soon."

Her voice, which had at first been couched in a whisper, had risen a little as she spoke the last words, and Cardew was quick to silence her.

"Sh!" he whispered tensely. "They may hear you on the boat."

They stared across at the black mass looming so vaguely through the mists ahead, and the thoughts of all three flew to the scene which was probably taking place within at that very moment, as four men gloated over the jewels they had stolen so easily from that West End shop.

"You don't think they'll discover the jewels are fakes?" whispered Shirley apprehensively.

The others shook their heads.

"Very improbable," muttered the Inspector softly, "unless they're specialists in gems —and I expect they leave that part of it to the men in Freeth."

Shirley opened her mouth to answer, but even as she did so a sudden sound stemmed the words upon her lips. For far away in the distance, as yet hardly more than a tremor in

the stillness, came the steady throbbing of a motor-boat engine as it churned the little river waves.

Instantly all was action on the bank. Shirley caught Alan's hand and gripped it feverishly, then very silently both arose and pressed yet farther back into the shadows of the trees. Cardew was already on his feet motioning to his men who lined the banks. A motor-boat of a very fast racing type had been carried into the shelter of the bushes, and beside it crouched a man whose prowess at the wheel had become a thing of fame.

" All set ? " whispered Cardew urgently.

" All set," nodded the man in reply.

Alan stared excitedly around him. In the shadows of the banks four more boats were visible, and near by each crouched men eager for the fight.

Louder and almost menacing came the sound of the engine as the vessel approached, and upon the house-boat a red light suddenly gleamed, streaming a rosy path along the rippling water. Into its rays the narrow bows of a motor-boat shot swiftly along, cutting though the water with incredible ease. There were two men huddled up within, but at that distance it was impossible to discern their features. It was only when at last, arrived at the house-boat, the engine was stopped and

a little figure leapt lightly from the boat and proceeded to mount, with surprising fleetness, the narrow rope-ladder dangling down the side, that Shirley caught her breath in sudden recognition. Alan pressed her hand meaningly and together they exchanged a glance of triumph. For Johan Cohen was now within the boat. There was no mistaking the immense distinction of that stocky little figure. Cardew looked at them inquiringly, and they nodded their heads.

Then occurred an interval which shattered the nerves of those watchers on the banks. The man at the wheel was still seated within the boat and they dare make no sound which might give him the alarm. It was not only the person of Johan Cohen which Cardew required: it was also the secret destination of that motor-boat which awaited him.

Five . . . ten minutes passed, and then the little figure appeared once more upon the deck and proceeded to descend the ladder. This time, however, his movements were much more slow, much more deliberate, for in his right hand he was bearing a sturdy leather case. Handing this to the man at the wheel he clambered quickly into the boat, the engine was re-started and with a roar the boat swung round and darted off in the direction whence it had come.

Even as it vanished from within that path of light Cardew gave the signal for immediate action.

Very silently, very rapidly, the crews slipped into their boats, and with one tumultuous roar their engines were started. Alan, Shirley, Cardew and the man who was to steer jumped hastily to their seats, and the quivering little vessel set off in swift pursuit of that other in the distance. The four boats manned with policemen and officered by Ferrers and Duprès, massed themselves around the house-boat, the deck of which was now crowded with agitated figures, drawn there in startled consternation by the uproar of the engines.

For one fleeting second Alan turned around and stared back at it, and even as he did so a bullet—fired from the house-boat—zipped across the water and was immediately answered by a return of shots from the surrounding policemen. Exultation seized him—the attack had now begun.

But already a vast track of water separated them from the fight behind. The motor-boat cut through the waves with the light ease of a swallow, and the rush of air past his face sent a thrill of wild exultation through the heart of Alan Grahame. He turned to Shirley, who sat beside him, and they exchanged a smile of jubilation. To both of them this mad dash

through the night in pursuit of a vanishing boat, with the wet spray tingling on their cheeks, the night wind roaring in their ears, the engine of the motor a throbbing pulse beneath them, was a thing unique, a peak of excitement to which they had never before attained . . . and Shirley sang aloud with the sheer joy of living, her song swallowed up in the tumult of the engine.

Down the river they dashed, and now it was gradually widening, until the lights of London were a brilliance on either bank, and at last the docks of Tilbury lay before them. And still that tiny red light on the boat they followed danced steadily on, past the docks and out into the open sea. So far their pursuit had apparently passed unnoticed, for Cardew had notified the river police that no interference was permissible, and had required a considerable interval to lie between the boats; but now he gave instructions for an instant increase of speed. Nearer and nearer they approached, and Alan peered out into the darkness seeking the distant outlines of a ship—that ship for which Johan Cohen was surely bound. But there was none; the sea appeared empty of any craft save that speck in front which was the boat they chased.

Now they began to gain rapidly upon it, and to gain with extraordinary ease: a fact

which was soon explained, however, for as they neared it they could see that the vessel was no longer moving—it had become motionless upon the water, the engine had stopped and the red light no longer twinkled at its stern. A puzzled frown darkened the face of Inspector Cardew. They had been sighted—that was clear. What was not so clear, however, was the strange behaviour of their quarry, who, instead of spurring on to greater speed had, apparently, surrendered at the start. The thing was incredible. No—some new devilry must be afoot, and the Inspector was not pleased.

And then Alan gave a sudden cry. For, rising gradually from the water itself, not far from where the boat was waiting, something dark and uncannily familiar merged upwards to the surface.

"My God!" cried Alan. "it's a submarine!"

His tone was alive with consternation. Was the man going to escape them after all? He turned to Cardew anxiously, but even as he did so he heard the Inspector give a rapid order, and at once their boat shot forward at redoubled speed.

Now began the most fantastic part of the evening's pursuit, for the chase had evolved into something totally outside their expectations—a chase against the emerging powers of a submarine and the highest speed of their

motor. A cold sweat mounted to Alan's brow; he felt chilled and angered with disappointment.

Nearer and nearer they approached the boat, and now they could see the two men seated calmly within, watching their coming.

The conning tower had slowly risen from the surface of the water, and in a very little while the submarine was only half-submerged. Suddenly a man appeared upon its decks, a ladder was thrown down and the boat in which was Johan Cohen moved rapidly towards it.

Cardew rapped out an order, the police boat leapt forward . . . and after that all was turmoil.

Cardew yelled to Cohen to surrender to the law; Cohen raised his voice in defiant reply, but the words were swallowed up in the roaring of the engines. Nearer and nearer their boat approached, and suddenly a bullet zipped across its bows. Alan yelled to Shirley to duck her head, and for the first time fear for her safety made him sick at heart.

Suddenly Cardew pressed a spring in the front of the boat, a door flew open and a small machine-gun was revealed.

Cohen's boat was now within a few yards of the submarine, when again the Inspector yelled at him to surrender. But the other merely laughed at him in reply. A grim look tightened the drawn face of the Inspector.

In his life he had had to make many rapid decisions — decisions involving tremendous results, but the man had never shirked them, and he did not do so now. On the instant, even as that scornful laugh reached his ears, Cardew bent to his gun, and a hail of bullets struck the boat of Johan Cohen, tearing an ugly hole in its side, a hole into which water at once began to flow.

As it sank, the two men within flung themselves into the water and began to swim rapidly towards the submarine.

The Inspector's powerful flashlight was trained upon the dangling ladder, and a second or so later two hands clutched at it frantically, and then a little figure, unmistakable in spite of its sopping clothes, began to mount it rapidly. There was no time to hesitate ; another second and the man would be in safety.

Cardew's gun spat viciously.

Johan Cohen swayed suddenly, then turned sideways towards the man who had fired ; a derisive smile parted his lips and his right hand lifted into a mocking salute. Without a cry, without a sound he toppled backwards into the swirling water and the waves closed over him.

Even as he fell the submarine began to sink back slowly into the water whence it had emerged.

"YES," said Inspector Cardew, when a few hours later Shirley, Alan and he were all gathered together in his private office in New Scotland Yard. "Yes, he was a brave fellow, too, was Johan Cohen, with a natural genius for doing the graceful thing. What could have been more heroic than the way he met his end, yet actually he was only being extremely sensible—avoiding the ignominy and shame of death upon the scaffold. For if he'd surrendered to us he'd have hung all right. He could never have explained away that terrible graveyard in Freeth. He was a clever devil, though. I've got that poor, half-drowned rat we picked up to talk, and he told me that fitted to the bottom of the submarine is a special sort of mechanism, working on the principle of a torpedo, by which cases containing stolen valuables can be shot out into the nets awaiting them.

"You remember those nets which the fishermen at Freeth went out to lay down every evening? They weren't put there for fish. At a given time each night—when Johan Cohen had got something to put in them—the submarine would arrive, shoot the cases into the nets and depart immediately.

Just think of the originality of the idea—delivering the goods in the sea. Then when they had been duly altered by the craftsmen at Freeth, Cohen would call for them, using the submarine all the time, and rush them down to the Bond Street shop for jewels stolen in France, and to the Rue de la Paix shop for those stolen in England. So, within a few hours of gracing the neck of an English duchess, a pearl necklace might easily be adorning that of a French marquise, had she patronised the Paris Santalie's. And all this with the minimum of risk. In fact," said Cardew slowly, " I really don't quite know how we *did* manage to find out about it at all." He smiled at Shirley admiringly. " If it hadn't been for Miss Grange's pluck in shadowing Johan Cohen . . ."

" And for Alan's dangerous eavesdropping at Freeth," she put in quickly.

" And for Inspector Cardew's clever activities here," countered Alan smilingly.

" Well," went on Cardew, unperturbed, " it's a good thing Ferrers and Duprès aren't here ; they might be jealous ! "

He laughed, but then a serious look came into his face.

" It's a great pity we couldn't get that submarine, though," he added thoughtfully. " But we weren't exactly fitted for dealing

with sea-craft on a scale like that. Anyway, they can't do much damage on their own, and if they turn up at Freeth we'll know how to deal with them. But "—and he frowned anxiously —" there's still Pedro the Cruel who's not been caught. I'd sleep more peacefully to-night if we'd got that devil under lock and key. But that's really a case for the Sûreté . . ."

Alan jumped to his feet.

" I was the only one who saw him," he cried. " Couldn't I go to France . . .'

Inspector Cardew burst out laughing.

" Take him home, Miss Grange," he murmured brokenly. " The man's incorrigible . . . he's never satisfied. Marry him at once and give him something else to think about than cleaning the world of crooks. He's getting greedy ! "

Shirley rose gracefully to her feet ; there was a determined look in those lovely clear-blue eyes, a firmness about her mouth. Smilingly she shook the Inspector by the hand, and then she turned to Alan.

" I'm afraid you won't be very free for the next few months, darling," she told him sweetly. " There's that little matter of a honeymoon, you know, and I've always longed to tour around the world."

Smiling mischievously she slipped her arm into his and led him from the room.

THE REAPER

FROM well within the shadow of the trees, the man looked up the long, straight drive towards Carshalton Hall. He remained absolutely motionless, staring through the darkness of the night at the gaunt silhouette of the grand old building.

It certainly presented a most imposing spectacle, the dark, stately outline shown up in bold relief against the moonlit sky. But the man in the wood had no interest whatever in the beauty of the scene before his eyes: he was watching, watching intently for signs of life, for a light at any rate at the windows. He intended reaching that house, getting into it. And he did not want to be disturbed.

Abruptly he made up his mind. No light was to be seen, nothing had happened in the few minutes that he had been watching to suggest that anyone was still about. He began to move forward stealthily, always keeping within the black shadows of the trees. He moved very carefully, heedful to make no noise, but this caution delayed him. He took some time to cover the few hundred yards which still separated him from his objective.

He found himself at last at the very edge of the belt of trees. He looked around him,

doubtful as to the best method of covering the short distance which still remained. It was all lawn, a flat open space in which no cover could be hoped for. On each side this lawn continued as far as he could see, giving no hope that farther round he might find a less exposed approach. He decided that he must risk being seen from the house, a risk which the prevailing darkness and the lateness of the hour did much to mitigate.

He walked across. He did not run, although the temptation to do so was strong upon him. But he knew that if anyone were watching, to run would be to advertise the fact that he had no business to be there. As he walked across the lawn this thought made him laugh quietly to himself.

He reached the shadow of the great house, leant up against the wall and for a moment stood stock-still, listening. No sound came to his ears, however. He breathed a sigh of relief. He was forced to admit that the short walk which he had just completed had taken more out of his stock of nerve than he had bargained for.

In direct contrast to his previous caution he now worked quickly, although he was careful still to be absolutely silent in all he did. A few steps brought him past the massive front door to a window. Here he stopped, and

applied a gentle pressure on the framework. Satisfied evidently by what his touch had told him, he withdrew a small instrument from his pocket. Under his expert persuasion, the catch soon opened.

Very carefully he pushed back the window until it was possible for him to pass through. Swinging one leg over the window-sill, he clambered noiselessly into the room.

He found himself in a little alcove, screened from the rest of the room by a thick curtain. One end of this he lifted cautiously, only an inch or so from the floor, but this small action told him all that he required to know. The room beyond was in complete darkness.

He stepped through the curtains, and looked about him. He could see nothing, for the curtains effectually prevented any of the moonlight outside to penetrate. Taking a minute electric torch from his pocket, he switched it on.

THE REAPER CHAPTER II

PROFESSOR OLIVER WEIR looked around him. The small study was overcrowded, but it provided the greatest privacy and had therefore been chosen from all the other rooms of Carshalton Hall. On his right

sat the new baronet, elder son of his old friend Sir Everard Peregrine; on his left the deceased baronet's sister, Mrs. Norton. In other chairs sat the two other children of Sir Everard, Guy and his sister Joan, and in the far corner their cousin Mark Thorold.

Weir looked thoughtfully at the sheaf of papers in front of him.

"Lionel," he said, "I think we can dispense with the rather dismal business of reading the will. I will give you a copy and you can peruse it by yourself. I propose merely to tell all of you here the more important points which do not concern Lionel in particular. Does that meet with your approval?"

Sir Lionel Peregrine nodded. Weir continued at once.

"The house and everything appertaining to it of course goes to Lionel. Just before your father died . . . I am speaking to you Guy, and to Joan now . . . he sold securities to the value of fifteen thousand pounds and converted the money into bearer bonds. These bonds are mentioned in the will and are to be divided between you two, the younger children's portion in fact. But, and this is the strange thing, these bonds were not deposited at the bank and I cannot find any trace of them. Nor can I find any trace of a safe in this house."

He paused and looked around him rather nervously. The old man realised that this news must come in the nature of a bombshell, particularly to the two people most intimately concerned.

"What!"

It was Guy Peregrine, rather flushed in the face, who had let the exclamation escape him.

"I cannot believe that we shall not find them," went on Weir quickly, "but in the meantime I am sorry to say to both of you, and to you, Lionel, that you will have to rely on Lionel for funds. You can of course treat the matter as a loan until the bonds are found. It is a most odd thing, and I have communicated with the solicitors, but they are unable to help me. Apparently your father sold the securities without their knowledge."

"But it is ridiculous, Oliver," Julia Norton broke in. "These things must be found. Does no one else know of them?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"We shall start a search to-morrow. Don't you know of any safe in the house, Lionel?"

Sir Lionel Peregrine looked up with a start. He had scarcely been listening to the conversation, deep in his own thoughts. Now he caught his aunt's eyes and held them as he answered:

" I never heard my father speak of any safe in this house."

Julia Norton frowned impatiently.

" But your father spoke to you about these bonds ? "

" Never. He never discussed business matters with me."

Mrs. Norton restrained with difficulty a violent desire to express her approval of her brother's conduct with regard to his son. Then she turned to her niece.

" You can come and stay with me, Joan, dear, until this matter is settled up satisfactorily."

The girl smiled.

" Thank you ever so much, Aunt Julia. But I think I ought to be here to help in the search."

She laughed rather ruefully.

" Are we ruined, Mr. Weir ? " she asked.

The old man shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

" No, my dear, of course not, of course not ! The bonds will turn up all right, don't you worry. Only it may take a little time to find them. You and Guy must exercise a little patience, that's all. And Lionel will be generous, I have no doubt."

He looked rather apprehensively at the young man sitting on his right, noted the weak face and the clothes which were almost

too well cut, realised that the girl could scarcely trust her brother very far. Of the younger brother Guy he gave no thought. Guy was similar to Lionel as he knew well, similar in character although perhaps more dissolute in habit. The thought struck him that it was strange, very strange, that two such worthless sons had been born to that great gentleman their father.

Then once more he thought of their sister Joan, and a warm glow seemed to come over him, refreshing as the scent of some sweet flower after a storm. She had all the virtues of her father, all of them and more. The frail beauty which was hers was not skin deep; every delicate feature, so pleasant to the eye, had its counterpart in her character. Joan Peregrine was beautiful with a loveliness which was greater than mere prettiness, and Weir reflected rather sadly that, since the estate was entailed in such a manner that it could never be inherited on the female side, she, the only worthy child of her father, was for ever prevented from being the mistress of Carshalton Hall.

"Is there anything else?"

It was Sir Lionel Peregrine who had so rudely disturbed his thoughts. Weir started rather guiltily; he had almost forgotten the business of the moment in his reverie.

" Nothing out of the ordinary."

Guy laughed, but there was no humour in the sound.

" All the same," he said, " I think it's quite enough to be getting on with. Do I understand, Mr. Weir, that until these bonds are found, Joan and I must live on the charity of Lionel ? "

" That is so."

The youth laughed again, dryly, and got to his feet.

" Well, I'm for bed. It's very late already. If you will grant me the privilege of using my own room for a little longer, Lionel, I will do my best to find that safe."

His brother looked up quickly.

" Of course you may stay, Guy. As long as you like. But you speak very glibly of a safe. Are you sure there is one ? "

" Fifteen thousand pounds is a lot of money. Do you think it likely that Father would have left it lying about for any prying eyes to see . . . and keep. Remember they are bearer bonds."

Julia Norton also rose from the arm-chair in which she had been sitting.

" I must say I think there's a lot in that," she said, " and I agree with Guy that it is quite late enough for us all to be in bed. After all, we can't do anything more to-night, can we, Oliver ? "

Weir smiled.

" I am glad you are taking it so sensibly. Guy. No, we can do no more to-night. To-morrow we shall start an organised hunt through the house for these bonds."

He rose to his feet and gathered the papers on the table in front of him into one neat pile. As he picked up the last, however, he held it in his hand for a moment, a frown on his forehead.

Suddenly he made up his mind, and turned to Lionel.

" Your father told you the story of the Reaper, of course ? "

" The Reaper ? You mean the tale of the bell ? "

" Yes, but the story of how the legend came into being ? "

" Oh, Mr. Weir, is there a legend ? " Joan Peregrine, unable to withhold her curiosity, had burst into the conversation. " I always thought that it was just a silly story."

Professor Weir looked at her for a moment without replying. Then he made up his mind.

" There is certainly a story. I confess I am surprised that your father never told you. I think every member of the family should know what is, after all, a very interesting piece of folk-lore. It won't take me long. Shall I tell you now ? "

Sir Lionel got up from his chair.

" By all means, but I have a suggestion to make first. This is not a private matter, is it ? Let's move to the hall, where we can all be comfortable and not cramped for room as we are here. We might also have a little refreshment before we go to bed."

" I told Thomas to leave out some drinks in the hall," remarked Joan.

" That settles it, doesn't it ? "

The house-party moved into the hall which was found to be in darkness. The lights were turned on and chairs were drawn up near to that occupied by the Professor. Drinks having been provided, Weir was about to start his tale when Mrs. Norton stopped him.

" Just one minute, Oliver. It's extraordinarily cold, isn't it ? Are all the windows shut ? "

Mark Thorold, nearest to the outside wall, jumped up.

" I'll see."

He walked over to the curtains and drew them aside.

" These are all right."

Turning to his left, he crossed to the other curtains and looked behind them.

" Yes, there's one open here. Thomas must have forgotten to shut it."

He closed the window and returned to his seat.

" Thank you, Mark." Mrs. Norton settled herself comfortably. " Thomas is getting very careless nowadays. The worst of it is that one does not like rebuking old family servants. Well, Oliver ? "

The Professor lit a cigar before replying. When it was drawing to his satisfaction he looked up at his little audience.

" I shall always remember when your father first told me the story, Lionel. One evening, after we had dined together alone, he retired from the dining-room and returned with an old document. This he handed to me to read without a word of explanation. Although I have a wide experience of old documents, it took me all my time to read this one, and when I had done so eventually the story that I had deciphered was a very curious one."

He paused for a moment and gazed meditatively at the end of his cigar.

" It is known as the story of the Reaper because that document is supposed to have been written by your ancestor whose picture that is hanging over the fireplace. The Reaper, as he was called, was the first owner of this place, which seems to have been the apple of his eye. From what one can gather the estate became to him a sort of symbol of

all that was worth living for. He must have been of a slightly fanatical turn of mind for none dared to interfere with his administration of the place, and the legend tells us that even the representatives of the Crown were terrified to go to him in order to collect the taxes which he was expected to pay. One day, just before it was time for the corn to be cut, he was riding round his fields and suddenly came across a man who was cutting the ripe corn with the evident intention of stealing it. A violent altercation took place between the pilferer and the infuriated baronet ; the man dared to be rude, even abusive, whereupon the Reaper, snatching from the man's grasp the sickle with which he had been cutting the corn, made a wild sweep at him and striking the fellow on the neck nearly severed the unfortunate man's head from his body."

Mrs. Norton's rather pert voice broke in on the narrative :

" I am convinced I should have disliked that man."

Weir smilingly continued :

" Naturally this act caused the greatest indignation in the district, but the fear in which your ancestor was held, combined with the fact that he was known to hold the Queen's favour, prevented any action being taken against him. The story ends by saying that

towards the end of his life he repented of this act of violence, and in the manner of those days decided to make what reparation he could. He gave considerable alms to the poor of the district, and caused a chapel to be built in which prayers were to be said for the repose of his soul and that of the murdered man. This chapel actually was built, but was destroyed during the Reformation and the site is unknown. The legend is that when the head of the house is about to die, a bell—the bell of the chapel—is heard tolling faintly in the distance."

There was quite an appreciable pause after the Professor had completed the tale. Then Joan laughed suddenly.

"You've made me feel quite creepy, Mr. Weir. Has anybody ever heard the bell. Did it sound . . . the other day?"

Weir smiled at the girl facing him.

"My dear, you know what these stories are. Needless to say I have never heard it, and I don't suppose anyone else has, for that matter. Most old places, after all, have just such stories attached to them, and although in certain cases unusual, even eerie, things do happen, there is no reason to attach any belief to this one. But as folk-lore, a subject which has always thrilled me so much, they are undoubtedly interesting."

"I should have said," put in Mrs. Norton

dryly, " that as a bedtime story this one is much too apt to provoke a sleepless night. I'm surprised at you, Oliver. Fancy telling us a story like that at this time of night. Well, I'm going to bed."

She rose from her chair, and moved towards the stairs. Lionel followed her.

" May I have a word with you, Aunt Julia ? In private ? "

Mrs. Norton turned and looked at him. It struck her that at that moment her nephew appeared even more repellent to her than usual, even more of the effeminate than normally. Mastering her aversion as much as she was able, she did her best to conceal any hint of it in her voice as she replied :

" At this time of night, Lionel ? Won't it keep until to-morrow ? "

" I'm very sorry." Lionel's voice was short. " In point of fact it's a matter of some importance."

" Oh, very well, very well."

Lionel preceded her to the door of the study and held it open for her. Mrs. Norton, feeling rather annoyed at again being baulked of her rest, sat down in the only arm-chair.

" Well ? "

" It's about Joan."

" About Joan ? What's the child been doing now ? "

" Of course you've already noticed it ? "

" Noticed it ? Oh, of course I have. Noticed what ? Do be explicit. I'm not a thought-reader, Lionel."

Mrs. Norton could not prevent a hint of annoyance creeping into her voice. It was bad enough, she thought, to be kept up at all hours of the night without her nephew beating about the bush in this manner.

Lionel frowned.

" I mean the way this fellow Thorold hangs about her continuously. He never allows the girl out of his sight. When I came in this evening he was trying to propose to her on the staircase."

Mrs. Norton sat up suddenly.

" On the stairs ? Are you sure ? What a funny place to propose ! "

" I fail to see anything humorous in it at all." Lionel spoke irritably. " I trust that you won't either when you have considered the position with deliberation. Personally, I think it would be a most undesirable marriage for Joan. The man hasn't got a penny ! "

" He's a distant cousin of yours, Lionel. And he is working, anyway. As you know, he is Oliver Weir's secretary ? "

Lionel laughed derisively.

" Earning a salary of about two hundred a year ! "

Mrs. Norton looked up sharply. Something about her nephew always irritated her, always succeeded in making her angry.

"You're a gross materialist, Lionel," she said, striving to keep her voice on an even keel. "I know perfectly well that marriage entails many expenses, but if people waited for the ideal marriage the race would very soon die out! When I got engaged to my own beloved Henry we loved each other, but he hadn't any worldly goods to endow me with. Of course he had his brains."

"Perhaps he didn't endow you with those."

For a moment Mrs. Norton could scarcely believe her ears. An almost overwhelming desire to assault her nephew came upon her, but by a superhuman effort she retained control of her frayed temper.

"You forget yourself, Lionel," she said coldly. "Personally I like Mark. I'd much sooner that Joan flirted with that sort of man than with one of these modern fashion plates. I should like to see Joan marry Mark, and you may be quite sure that if she wants to she will, quite regardless of whether you or I or anyone else approves or not. I must say that I admire her spirit."

"Aunt Julia, I do wish you'd . . ."

He got no further. Mrs. Norton was now thoroughly worked up. She had resented

being delayed from retiring to her bed in the first place, and she had resented her nephew's attitude throughout the interview even more. But once started it was not in her character to stop until she had said all that she intended to say.

" Late marriages may be all very well for middle-aged men who waddle in Mincing Lane and think of money first and Life's sacred ties as an afterthought." The words came out with a rush, effectually silencing Lionel's attempt to speak. " But that sort of arrangement is no good for women, especially good-looking ones."

Mrs. Norton rose from her seat majestically.

" No, Lionel, all that you have said only persuades me that it is an excellent thing for these two young people to see as much as possible of each other. Don't interrupt me ! Whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder ! "

Lionel rose to his feet. He was slightly flushed, but otherwise he gave no sign of the fury which he felt. He spoke quietly, but his voice sounded cold as ice :

" I think it rather premature to say that the Almighty has joined them."

Mrs. Norton stopped dead in her stately progress to the door.

" That doesn't matter," she said acidly. " I feel sure He intends to."

Smiling to herself at this rejoinder, which rather pleased her, Mrs. Norton made her way back to the hall. All the lights were out and the room was deserted. Assuming that all the others had already retired for the night, she made her way across the room by the light of the fire which was burning merrily. She reached the foot of the stairs and started to ascend.

When she was half-way up Mrs. Norton stopped abruptly and stood motionless, listening. She heard nothing. Puzzled, for she was almost certain that some sound had attracted her attention, she remained for a second undecided whether to renew the ascent or return to the hall and investigate.

Very faintly at first, but suddenly gathering volume with every moment, although never loud, a sound not unlike that of a bell tolling in the distance came to her ears.

For one long second Mrs. Norton remained where she was, transfixed with horror. A short sentence, spoken only a short half-hour before, jumped to the very forefront of her mind. The words rattled in her brain, forced themselves upon her violently against her will :

" The legend is that when the head of the house is about to die, a bell—the bell of the chapel—is heard tolling faintly in the distance."

Involuntarily Mrs. Norton threw her hands up to her ears and closed out the hateful sound. She felt faint, and swayed slightly. She put one hand out to the banisters to prevent herself from falling. At once she heard the sound again.

It was very faint now, seemed to be a long way off. Mrs. Norton tried to scream, but no sound came from her throat. Suddenly she lost all control. With a muffled shriek she rushed up the stairs and along the passage to her room; she threw herself on the bed just as she was and buried her face in the pillows.

THE REAPER CHAPTER III

GUY approached the study door silently and listened. A light was showing under the crack of the door, but he could hear no sound of voices. For a moment or two he stood motionless, lacking the moral courage to face the coming interview with his brother, which he knew would be unpleasant.

He considered the situation for a moment, mentally rehearsed what he would say in a few seconds. The interview was of immense importance to him, and if he could conclude it successfully would take a great load from

his mind. Abruptly he made up his mind and turned the handle of the door.

He saw his brother sitting at the desk with his back towards him. Guy looked round the little room and saw to his relief that Lionel was alone. He shut the door behind him.

Lionel looked round quickly at the sound. From the expression on his face Guy rather wished he had chosen a more opportune moment than this for the interview; his brother was evidently annoyed about something, for he was scowling in a most unprepossessing manner.

"Aunt Julia gone to bed?"

He asked the question lightly, as if he had come in on no particular business. He lit a cigarette casually, and sat down in a chair.

"Yes. She left a few minutes ago."

There was an awkward pause. Guy, uncomfortable, could not make himself meet his brother's eyes. He sensed rather than saw that Lionel was not deceived, realised something was in the air.

"Well?"

The question was rapped out, almost imperious in its demand for an answer. Guy looked up.

"Lionel, there's something I want to talk to you about."

"What is it?"

" It's rather hard to explain. I . . ."

Guy was feeling supremely uncomfortable. Hostility seemed to fill the air of the small study, seemed to be forming a barrier between himself and his brother. He cursed inwardly that his luck should have brought him to Lionel just at this time.

" I . . . well, I was wondering if you could possibly let me have a small advance. To be paid back as soon as the bonds are found, of course. You see, I . . ."

Lionel cut him short with a movement of the hand.

" Horses or women ? "

Guy sat up in his chair, and a certain rise in the colour of his face betrayed the fact that the gibe had gone home.

" I don't see why you should jump down my throat like that. As a matter of fact, it's got nothing to do with either horses or women."

" Cards ? "

" Yes."

" Where ? Your club ? "

" You're damned inquisitive, aren't you ? " Guy laughed nervously. " If you must know, it wasn't at the club. I was playing at a friend's house."

Lionel smiled, but it was a mirthless smile.

" I learnt never to play cards for money at

a friend's house shortly after I was weaned," he remarked dryly.

"Yes, but you were always brilliant, weren't you?"

Guy suddenly realised that, if he were to succeed in his object, he must keep his temper. He pulled himself together with an effort.

"Lionel, don't be a brute! I won't call on you again."

"I intend to see to that. And you may as well understand that you're not going to call on me now."

Lionel laughed tonelessly, and the sound grated on Guy's ears.

For a few moments there was a silence. Then suddenly Lionel broke it.

"You've been getting three hundred a year, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"I can afford to give you just half that amount until the bonds are recovered."

"What!"

Guy could not restrain the exclamation of dismay. Everything seemed to be going against him, everything seemed to be combining to thwart him. Lionel's voice, as cold as ice, broke in on his thoughts:

"I mean what I say. I am not nearly so well off as I thought I should be. I am being generous as it is."

" Generous ! " Guy laughed a little wildly. " Generous ! You've got a funny idea of generosity, haven't you ? It's not as if I was asking you for a present of the money, Lionel ; I'm only asking for a loan."

" On the security of the bonds ? "

" Yes."

" Hasn't it struck you," said Lionel very deliberately, " that for all we know at present those bonds may never be recovered ? "

" But Mr. Weir said he couldn't believe that we should not find them."

" Is Weir infallible ? "

Something in the tone of voice in which Lionel pronounced the words infuriated Guy. For a moment he saw red, lost complete control of himself.

" You . . . damned . . . swine ! "

He hissed the words rather than spoke them, let them pass his lips slowly, yet with a wealth of intensity. He half crouched in his chair, and with difficulty restrained himself from springing at his brother and burying his fingers in his throat. It required only a tiny spark more to set alight a bonfire of madness in his brain, to render him temporarily homicidal.

Then, just as suddenly as it had come upon him, the spasm passed. He took out his handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his brow. He threw away his half-smoked cigarette,

and found his fingers were shaking. When he spoke, his voice was uncertain, seemed almost to be coming from someone else, someone outside himself.

" Can you let me have a hundred on account, Lionel ? I tell you it's terribly important. I've got to settle that debt by next week at latest."

For a long minute Lionel stared at his brother. Then he spoke, and his words were final :

" In the ordinary course of events you will find the sum of thirty-seven pounds, ten shillings credited to your account at the beginning of next quarter."

" You refuse ? "

" Please understand once and for all that I do not intend to subsidise your gambling."

Abruptly Guy rose from his chair and walked rather unsteadily to the door. He turned the handle mechanically, and opened it. Standing in the opening, he turned and faced Lionel, who had not moved.

" All right, Lionel." Inwardly, Guy was surprised at the steadiness of his voice. He pronounced the words coldly, with no hint of the fury which was in his soul. " All right, Lionel. You hold all the cards now, but, by Heaven, if ever I get the chance I'll get even with you for this ! "

He banged the door behind him.

A faint smile came over Lionel's face. For a moment he continued to sit motionless, staring at the floor in front of him, lost in his thoughts.

One thing was clear at the outset. He must wait a little longer. Guy could not yet be in bed, and it was essential that he should be entirely alone for his work. He took out his pocket-book, removed from it a slip of paper. This he examined carefully.

The sound of someone approaching along the passage suddenly came to his ears. He looked up and listened attentively; there could be no doubt that someone was approaching the door. Quickly he returned the slip to the pocket-book, and the book to his pocket.

The door opened and Weir put his head into the room.

"What! Still up, Lionel? I thought I saw a light coming under the door. Working?"

The Professor came into the room. He presented a curious spectacle, clad in pyjamas with an old faded dressing-gown covering them. He was wearing slippers of a violet hue, and his hair was slightly tousled.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but I wonder if you know where I can find the second volume

of this work ? I've looked in the library and I can't find it. Very interesting. Professor Baltensbergen on diatoms and infusoria."

Lionel felt a sense of relief. He had been surprised, not a little taken aback, by the identity of his visitor. The Professor had a curious power of making him feel ill at ease. But the explanation of Weir's presence had come so glibly and was so typical of the man that his suspicions were at once allayed.

" It sounds too interesting for words ! No, I'm afraid I haven't a notion where you can find it."

" Well, well, it doesn't matter." The Professor retired towards the door. " I'll find it in the morning. Good night, Lionel."

" Good night, Mr. Weir."

Lionel listened to the sound of the old man's footsteps retreating down the passage. When he could hear them no more, he looked at his watch. He had determined to start his activities in precisely five minutes.

Those five minutes seemed to him to last more like five hours. He could not deny to himself that he felt nervous. He had no doubt that he would be successful in his object, but the mere thought of the possibility of being observed by someone before he had completed his task was sufficient to worry him very considerably.

He looked at his watch again. With a sigh of relief he saw that the five minutes had elapsed. He rose from his chair quickly, moved to the door, and put his hand on the knob. There he paused.

He realised that he had very nearly committed a serious error. Putting out his hand he switched off the lights and then opened the door.

The passage was in complete darkness. Lionel knew the house so well, however, that he required no light to guide him. He made his way along the passage to the hall, making no sound.

Here he found that the fire had not completely died down, and that a faint light, a sort of dusk, made it possible for him to make out the shapes of the various pieces of furniture in the room.

Now that he had started he did not hesitate. He moved over to the large bookcase, and ran his fingers lightly over the framework. Not one inch of the wood passed untouched by his hand. Nothing happened.

Lionel opened the bookcase. The catch made a slight noise, and he stopped dead, standing motionless, listening intently. But he could hear nothing, and he bent to his task again. Just for one moment he delayed to wipe the perspiration from his forehead;

he had just passed through rather a bad second.

He ran his fingers lightly over the books, but could find no irregularity. He began to take them out singly, replacing one as he removed another. This process took him some time.

Then, suddenly, he found a book which he could not move. He tried the next one, and the next one after that. All three remained firmly stuck together, as well as the following four.

Lionel, his fingers shaking with excitement, pressed against every exposed inch in turn. At last something gave very slightly under the pressure. All the seven covers swung outwards, stuck together and working on a hinge.

A steel door came into view, about six inches high and a foot long. But now the rest was all plain sailing. Lionel found what he had expected to find . . . a combination lock. He thought of that slip of paper in his pocket, of the word written thereon. He wasted no more time, but twisted the dial quickly ; a second later and the door opened.

Lionel inserted his hand, felt in the safe, and extracted a bundle of papers. These he examined quickly by the light of a match. He paused just for a moment, to wonder that a small bundle of papers could be worth so

much, could be worth fifteen thousand pounds. Then he put them away in the inside pocket of his coat.

Working rapidly now, he shut the safe and replaced the swinging books. He closed the bookcase and walked over to the fireplace, stood with his back to it and lit a cigarette. He smiled to himself ; the task had been easier than he had dared to hope it would be. He had the money, the bonds that would clear him of the worries which had never really left him for the past few years. He could pay now, pay his debts ; or, better still, perhaps fly the country and start again with this new capital. To his brother or his sister he gave no thought.

Suddenly something moved in the far corner of the room, near the staircase. Lionel stood stock-still, a cold fear breaking over him. Then abruptly he pulled himself together. Nerves, just nerves. He had just been through a worrying few minutes and his eyes were tired. Or perhaps the firelight was playing tricks with him. He laughed to himself.

There it was again. This time the sweat broke out in great beads upon his forehead. There could be no mistake : Lionel knew, beyond all shadow of doubt, that someone, or something, was in that room with him.

" Who's there ? "

It was more of a croak than a cry, for something was at his throat, something which jerked him off his feet and seemed to cut into his flesh, something which was cold as ice. He tried to tear it away with his hands, but it was useless.

Sir Lionel Peregrine pitched forward on to his face, and lay as still as death.

UPSTAIRS, in her little sitting-room, Joan smiled at Mark Thorold.

" Mark," she laughed, " you really are a disgrace ! Here you are, keeping me up to all hours and just chattering away about nothing in particular ! "

She yawned and stretched out her arms, bringing her hands together behind her head in such a manner that they formed a cushion.

Mark watched her through half-closed eyes. It seemed to him that never had he seen a creature so utterly desirable. Her frail beauty, a perfection in feature enhanced by a gentle diffusion of colour with which cosmetics had obviously had nothing to do, was set off exquisitely by her attitude. Her figure, slight yet not too slight, appeared to him the

embodiment of grace, even to the slim ankles. He sat up suddenly.

" Joan," he said earnestly, " I'd like to ask you a question. You may think it impertinent of me, but all the same I'd value your opinion on it."

The girl smiled, but more for her own satisfaction than for his.

" Well ? "

" Do you think that, provided a man can just afford to keep the girl whom he loves, he is justified in asking her to marry him if she has been accustomed to a life of . . . well, almost of luxury ? "

Joan laughed lightly.

" What odd questions you do ask me, Mark ! Why, that would depend entirely on the girl. Provided that the man was honest with the girl and told her exactly what to expect, and then she married him with her eyes open, I can't see that she can have any grumble afterwards."

For a moment Mark did not answer ; then he also smiled.

" I suppose you're right," he said, " but it's a hard thing to do."

" What ? Confess your poverty ? "

" Yes."

For a moment there was a silence between them. Then the girl looked up.

" Are you thinking of making this confession to some girl ? "

Just for a second Mark hesitated. Then :

" Yes, I am."

Joan settled herself comfortably in her chair.

" Well, since you find it so difficult perhaps you'd better have a rehearsal. I'll act as your confessor ! "

She waited for a moment, anxious to see whether Mark would fall in with her suggestion. His first words showed that he was ready to enter into the spirit of her proposal.

" Dearest, I am a poor man, but I shall be rich if only you will love me ! "

She looked at him, a surprised expression on her face.

" Why ? Is she so very rich ? "

Mark laughed.

" I don't think she's got a bean," he said.

" In that case aren't you talking nonsense ? "

" I meant to imply that just in the possession of her love I should be richer than all other men."

" Oh, very pretty ! But I'm afraid that won't do in these days, you know," Joan smiled. " The modern miss doesn't care a rap for sentiment. I think you'd probably only make her feel sick. You mustn't make the girl you love feel sick just as you are proposing to her ! "

Mark rose to his feet.

" Very well. I'll try again. Dearest, I am in love with you ! I have no money, no prospects unless Mr. Weir leaves me all his wealth, which is unlikely since I am only his private secretary. I can, however, offer you a home in his house, provided you would pay your way by doing the house-keeping. It would, of course, only be a room on the third floor, back."

" D'you know, honestly, I think I'd prefer to feel sick ! "

" I am a poor man, but if . . ."

Joan threw out her hands towards him.

" Heavens ! Don't start again ! "

" But I thought you said that you preferred it ? "

" Yes, but she mightn't."

Mark suddenly took her hand in his.

" Joan," he said quietly, " you know it's you I want to please . . ."

The girl rose to her feet.

" Mark, dear," she said softly, " please go to bed now. I'm terribly tired, and it really is awfully late."

As if in confirmation of her words, the clock in the hall could be heard chiming out the hour of midnight. The girl and the youth looked at each other for a few seconds without speaking. Mark understood something of the

girl's desire, realised that she wished to answer the question which she must know was to come, at a time to be chosen by her. Something in the way she looked at him made him understand her, gave him perhaps some measure of hope that when eventually she would allow him to ask it of her, the answer to that question would be in his favour.

He yielded to a sudden impulse and raised her fingers to his lips. When he looked up he thought he recognised an infinite tenderness in her eyes. He longed to take her in his arms, to find her unresisting and to crush that sweet red mouth to his. But he knew that would be madness. Better far to wait, to let her take her time.

"Good night, Joan."

"Good night, Mark, and thank you, my dear."

She said the last words so softly that he scarcely heard them, but they were more than enough by way of recompense to him. Mark made his way along the passage to his own room thankful that he had managed to keep his head.

Left alone, Joan moved through the communicating door into her bedroom, but she did not immediately undress. She had so much to think about, so much to decide. She sat down for a moment on the couch, sat

down and wondered why on earth she had stopped Mark Thorold, why on earth she had not allowed him to express his love. She did not doubt what her answer would be, did not doubt it for a second. Thoughts flew through her small head, tumbled pell-mell in their haste for expression, left her bewildered.

Twenty minutes later she realised that she had no hope of going immediately to sleep. She was still tired, but the desire for slumber seemed to have left her. She decided to have recourse to a book, to read a little in the hope that by taking her mind off the happenings of the day she might perhaps inveigle sleep to take her unawares. She looked around for a book.

There wasn't one in the room. An expression of annoyance escaped her ; she perceived that she had left the novel she was reading down in the hall. For a moment she hesitated, wondering whether it were worth while going down to fetch it. Then she realised that without its help she could scarcely hope for sleep, and that decided her. She stepped out into the passage.

Everything was in pitch darkness. Joan looked back into her room and saw the candle resting on her dressing-table. She retraced her steps, lit it, and returned to the door. She passed through into the passage.

She did not really require the light to guide her, for she knew every inch of the way to the hall. But something about the inky blackness of the night had been unpleasant, almost held a menace. Involuntarily she thought of the story of the Reaper, the story which the old Professor had told them all that evening just before she had come upstairs, told them so effectively and seemed to delight in the telling. She could not banish a mental picture of the luckless thief, lying bleeding on the ground at the feet of her infuriated ancestor, his head half-severed from his body.

The girl laughed a trifle nervously. She called herself a fool to think of such things, particularly at that moment. But, the nearer she came to the hall, the more vivid did this picture seem to be before her eyes. At the top of the stairs she stopped.

She looked down. The light of the fire had practically gone; she could scarcely see to the bottom of the stairs in front of her. She held her candle high above her head, but this made little difference.

Suddenly Joan made up her mind. She had nearly turned back, but now she took a step forward and started to descend to the hall. She was furious with herself, furious at having allowed her nerves to play such havoc with her common sense.

" What on earth can hurt you ? " she asked herself almost savagely. " What in heaven's name are you afraid of ? You're no longer a schoolgirl, you idiot ! "

She almost ran down the stairs. Somehow to move quickly seemed to give her courage, to strengthen her resolve. At the back of her mind, although this she did not own even to herself, was the thought that the sooner she had got the novel, the sooner would she be back in the comfort of her cosy room. It seemed unaccountably far away just at that moment.

She reached the bottom of the stairs, moved quickly across the hall to the table where she remembered leaving the book. But, just as she reached it, out went her candle.

Joan realised that her haste had been her undoing. She had no matches, and although she knew there must be a box somewhere in the room, she knew not in the least where to search for it. She looked over to the fire ; all flame had long since gone, but the dying embers were still red. By their light she would at least be able to identify the book as hers.

She put out her hand, felt the edge of the table, and felt along its surface for the novel. Her fingers came in contact with a volume almost at once. She picked it up ; it appeared

to be more or less of the right size. She turned the book in her hand, and walked over towards the fireplace.

Half-way across the hall she stopped abruptly. Something seemed to have impelled her to do so, and for a moment she wondered what it could have been. She listened attentively, but there was no sound to be heard. Strangely enough she no longer felt frightened; instead there had come to her a feeling of suppressed excitement. Joan did her best, but try as she might she could not account for this sensation, a feeling tantamount almost to presentiment.

She shook it off with difficulty, took another step forward towards the fire. It was then she realised that it was her proximity to the fireplace which repelled her. She had to force herself to advance another pace.

Her eyes were not accustomed to the gloom. The red cinders of the fire gave out a little light. As she drew near she looked downwards, in order not to approach too near the fender. For the second time she stopped, but this time she remained motionless, as if turned into stone.

There was something—a shape—lying grotesquely at her feet. Joan felt the blood run cold in her veins, felt that she would swoon. She tried to move, to run, anything to get

away. But the power of her mind over her limbs seemed to have left her; she could not move. She tried to scream; only a croak came, a croak which she failed to recognise as emanating from herself.

She swayed. Something seemed to snap. She screamed.

THE REAPER CHAPTER V

THE principal bedrooms of Carshalton Hall are situated at the front of the house and are on the first floor. At the window of one of these an old man sat, well concealed from observation from the outside by a judicious arrangement of the curtains of which he was rather proud, since they in no way impeded his own view of the outside world.

He kept an eagle eye on the lawn in front of him, and on the drive stretching away through the wood. He was thankful for the brightness of the moon, which made it possible for him to see some distance. Lovingly he fingered a pair of night-glasses which he held ready in his right hand.

Suddenly his whole figure stiffened; he had caught sight of something—a shadow perhaps—moving, or so he thought, at the edge of the wood.

The old man was interested even in shadows. The glasses flew to his eyes, and were quickly focused.

" Great Scott ! "

The exclamation escaped him involuntarily. He kept the glasses to his eyes a moment longer, stared into the darkness. He watched the figure of a man moving furtively away from the house until he was lost among the trees and the prevailing shadows. Then slowly he lowered his hand on to the window-sill.

" Who in heaven's name was that ? And where is Lionel ? "

He spoke the words out loud, although they were intended only for himself. He failed to understand the situation : it had been to see someone else—someone he knew—that he had made himself sit up for this lonely vigil.

Something had gone wrong, of that he was convinced. He had been waiting to see Sir Lionel Peregrine leave the house in just this manner, and instead he had seen a figure which he failed to recognise. Had he been right to trust so much to his own judgment ? Was there somebody working with Lionel, working to despoil the younger children of their legacy ?

Then, all of a sudden, a sound came to his ears which made his blood run cold. Professor Oliver Weir leapt to his feet. He had heard

a scream, a shriek of agony, and it had come from somewhere in the house. He rushed to the door, pulled it open, and went headlong down the passage and the stairs as fast as his old legs would carry him.

THE REAPER CHAPTER VI

"WELL, Inspector?"

Detective-Inspector Beamish looked up across the desk of the little study and smiled wanly.

"It's an odd case, Professor. Usually, in any murder case, the first thing we look for is a motive, and sometimes that motive is damned hard to find. But in this case nearly everyone seems to have a motive quite sufficient in itself to have prompted them to do the deed."

He looked down at the pad on which he had been writing.

"Consider the situation, Mr. Weir. Sir Lionel is found lying on the ground with his throat cut from ear to ear. That's where we start. Now, his brother, who is now Sir Guy, is known to have had a violent quarrel with him last night. I have the testimony of the old butler that when he went his rounds last thing last night, he was surprised to see a light

coming from under the door of this very room. Thinking that perhaps it might have been overlooked, he came towards the room and he heard voices raised in anger. They were the voices of the murdered man and of his brother. That in itself would justify a very close investigation, almost an arrest, but . . ."

There was a moment's pause.

" But what ? "

" We know that Mark Thorold is in love with the murdered man's sister. We know, from what Mrs. Norton has said regarding an interview she had last night with the deceased, that Sir Lionel was violently opposed to the proposed union. There is an old saying, Mr. Weir, which runs : ' Always look for the girl in the case '."

The Inspector looked up quickly, and stared into the eyes of the Professor.

" And then there's the girl herself. She was found, by you, standing by the body, with those missing bonds in her hand."

Weir leant forward earnestly.

" Inspector," he said steadily, " surely you don't suspect that sweet girl of this foul deed ? "

" I suspect everyone, Mr. Weir. Until I find the murderer, I've got to."

Weir sighed.

" She couldn't have done it, surely that's

obvious ? You've seen the gash in his throat ; how on earth could a girl have the strength to inflict such a wound ? "

The Inspector smiled.

" Please don't think I want to prove her guilty, Mr. Weir ! But you must understand that I cannot allow sentiment to stand in the way of my duty. A girl could easily have done it . . . with a sufficiently sharp instrument. There's another awkward point about the case ; no sign of the weapon."

" There are plenty of old swords, old claymores and things, hanging on the walls."

" Which are not very sharp ? It's no good Mr. Weir." The Inspector spoke sharply. " I've had a look at them all. You're not going to tell me that the murderer had time to clean the sword he used, replace the dust of centuries, and hang it up again before making his get-away ? No ! There is no sign of any weapon, and it's a most irritating feature of the case."

The Inspector frowned and looked down at his notes again. It was obvious to Weir, watching him very closely, that he was worried.

" Why won't you credit my story, Inspector ? " he asked suddenly.

" I'll credit it all right, sir," he laughed. " Don't think I don't believe you. But there

are plenty of poachers about these parts, and I think it was one of them that you saw. There are plenty of people already with obvious motives without dragging in an outsider who can have no motive at all. Remember what Miss Peregrine said: she found the bonds in her brother's pocket. If the crime had been prompted by robbery, they would have been gone."

"You believe that she was speaking the truth when she said that?"

"I do, but that doesn't let her out, Mr. Weir. She may have known they were there, perhaps have gone to find them."

"After he was killed?"

"After or before."

The Inspector laughed good-humouredly.

"I understand your feelings, Professor," he said. "I have them myself, you know. But . . . I cannot allow anything to interfere with my work."

There was a pause. Both men were thinking hard, trying to worry out the true facts from the mass of conflicting evidence.

"If only we could find that weapon!"

It was the Inspector who had spoken, almost to himself, but Weir heard him. He realised that the detective was right, that it was an absolute necessity to find it. He could not rid himself of the impression that the man he

had seen the previous night, stealing through the wood so furtively, had had something to do with the tragic death of the young man whom he had suspected of fraud, certainly, but nothing more. He understood that he regretted Lionel's death not one jot excepting where it caused such trouble to those of whom he was fond. That Lionel had intended to decamp with the money properly belonging to Guy and Joan he had not the faintest doubt, but on this he kept his own counsel, preferring to protect the family name and not drag it through the mire of an open court. He comforted himself with the reflection that the knowledge which he was withholding could not possibly help the Inspector in his investigation.

Weir looked at his watch, and noticed that it was well past noon.

" Inspector . . ." he began.

The words froze on his lips. A sound reached his ears, a sound which startled him. He looked abruptly at the detective, and saw that he also had heard it.

Seemingly from far away, the sound of a bell could be heard gently tolling.

" What's that ? "

Weir waited until the sound had ceased before he replied. When he did speak, the tone of his voice was very serious :

"Have you heard the legend connected with this family, Inspector?"

The detective shook his head. Briefly Weir told him, stressing no point but making it all very clear. When he had finished there was a silence.

"Are you trying to make me believe that that was the Reaper's bell?"

Weir hesitated; he knew the type of man with whom he had to deal, knew that the Inspector's matter-of-fact brain could scarcely be expected to give any credence to such a tale.

"I'm not trying to make you believe anything," he said. "I'm only telling you the general belief in these parts."

The Inspector could contain himself no longer; he burst into great peals of laughter. His mind, trained by his police work to make deductions from what he saw and to exclude most rigidly all else, found it most humorous that such a roundabout and fantastic explanation should be given for the ordinary ringing of a bell. He wiped away the tears of mirth which had gathered in his eyes.

"That's a beauty, Mr. Weir! A real beauty!"

Weir was annoyed. The sound of that bell had a tone which he had never heard before; there was something ethereal about it, something of foreboding. But a moment's reflection was sufficient to make him realise that he

could scarcely expect any other reception to the story from the representative of the law. Yet . . .

"You'd better warn Sir Guy! He's the head of the house now."

The Inspector spoke the words in a bantering manner. The Professor looked up sharply, to find the man's steel blue eyes fixed upon him. He made up his mind.

"You're staying to lunch, Inspector?"

"Thank you, Mr. Weir. If it is convenient, I should like to."

"Of course it is convenient. Anything that we can do to hasten the discovery of the truth we shall make convenient. You will not waste time if you stay here. You must remember, Inspector, that several of us, of the family, are under suspicion. We should like our names cleared as soon as . . ."

Weir stopped in the middle of his sentence. He leapt to his feet, rushed to the door. But Detective-Inspector Beamish, surprisingly active for his great size, was before him and half-way down the passage to the hall before he even reached the door. For the second time within twelve hours, Professor Weir had been rudely startled by a scream, a shriek of such soulful agony that it made the blood curdle in his veins, the sweat break out upon his forehead.

He reached the hall not far behind Beamish. The sight that met his eyes staggered him.

Guy Peregrine was lying on his back, the blood pouring from his throat. Standing as though transfixed, his sister Joan was staring at him, white as the death which was so near. At her feet, glistening in the rays of the sunlight coming through the windows, lay a blood-stained sickle.

Suddenly the girl seemed to sense their presence.

" I didn't do it ! " she screamed, and her voice grated on the old man's ears. " I didn't do it ! I had my back turned, and I heard him choke ! Oh, God, can't you understand ? When I turned round, someone threw that thing at my feet ! "

For a moment no one moved. Then the girl slowly looked up, until she was staring at the picture over her head, the picture of the Reaper.

" He must have done it ! "

The voice was so low that Beamish and Weir could only just hear her. For an appreciable space of time neither said a word. Then the Inspector advanced rapidly across the room.

" An admirable suggestion ! If I may say so, very likely indeed." His voice was harsh. " You come along with me, my girl ! "

WEIR turned abruptly from the window. He had watched the car until it was lost to sight down the drive, the car in which Beamish was removing Joan Peregrine from her ancestral home on a charge of murder. A sense of overwhelming disaster afflicted him, a feeling that with Joan's departure had gone all the happiness out of his life. Outside the sun was shining brilliantly, as if to mock him. Inside all was in shadow, more in keeping with his mood.

He looked across the room at Julia Norton. She presented a pathetic picture, her head bowed down, her whole attitude depicting the anguish which was in her soul. He caught his breath, sharply, almost viciously.

"It cannot be!" He paused. "It *shall* not be!"

Mrs. Norton looked up.

"What's the use of saying that, Oliver?" There was a touch of hopelessness in her voice. "You heard what Beamish said."

"That fool!"

Mrs. Norton shrugged her shoulders.

"Fool or no fool, he's the one in authority. He said quite plainly that the girl was guilty, and that any jury would convict.

Think of it! She was found with both her brothers, found alone with their poor mutilated bodies."

Weir snorted.

"The victim of cruel circumstances!"

"Possibly. But, to complete his case, there was a motive. With Lionel and Guy both out of the way, the next male heir is the only cousin, Mark Thorold. We know that Joan was going to marry Mark. And Mark Thorold, by his inheritance, is, as her husband, the only means whereby the girl could remain mistress of Carshalton Hall, of the house she loves!"

"Far-fetched!"

Mrs. Norton sighed.

"I agree, Oliver, far-fetched to you and me. But perhaps not to twelve men both good and true. . . . Oh, it's awful!"

Julia Norton broke down completely. The Professor moved over to her quickly, sat down beside her, took one of her unresisting hands in his. This he patted gently.

"Courage, Julia."

More he could not think of to say. Weir, beside the well-nigh hysterical woman, found himself tongue-tied. He continued to pat the hand in his, gently pressed it.

In a few moments Julia Norton recovered herself. She sat up straight, dried her eyes

with her handkerchief. She smiled heavily. . . .

" I'm sorry, Oliver. I shouldn't have given way like that in front of you. But . . . I can't believe that sweet child could have committed such frightful . . ."

" She didn't," Weir said bluntly.

" But then who did ? "

" I propose to find that out."

There was definite purpose in the tone of the old Professor's voice. Somehow it comforted Mrs. Norton as nothing else could have done. To her his announcement appeared in no way vainglorious ; she had complete faith in Weir's intelligence, whether it were applied to his everyday researches into science or to such a foreign task to him as this.

" Oliver," she said suddenly, " that poor boy Mark is almost mad. He's tearing his hair. . . ."

" Tell him to refrain," remarked Weir shortly ; " he may want it later."

" How can you joke to-day ! Please listen to me ! I don't know what to do with him ; he wants to go and murder the policeman ! "

" Now, look here, Julia. I know the boy is badly hit, and no wonder ! But he's your job ; for heaven's sake don't let him come and disturb me at this juncture ! "

Weir had spoken sharply, and his words had their effect on Mrs. Norton.

"Oh, I know, Oliver," she paused. "I . . . I should like to tell you something."

The Professor waited patiently for her to speak. His instinct told him that she was finding it difficult, but that a little indulgence would be well worth the while.

The words came from Mrs. Norton with a rush:

"I didn't dare to tell the Inspector. I thought he'd just laugh at me! But . . . Oliver, last night, after I had spoken to Lionel in the study, I made my way back to my room in the dark. As I was ascending the stairs, I suddenly heard a . . . a . . . oh, it was horrible!"

"What did you hear?"

"I heard a bell, Oliver, a bell tolling in the distance, a bell exactly like the Reaper's bell!"

Weir jumped from the sofa to his feet, and stood facing Mrs. Norton.

"When did you hear this bell?"

"When I was going back to my room, I tell you. It must have been nearly midnight."

"Thank God!"

Mrs. Norton stared at the Professor, almost unable to believe her ears.

"Thank you," she said curtly, "that the

fact of my being terrified out of my wits should constitute a reason to express gratitude to the Almighty fills me with joy."

Weir laughed.

" Julia," he smiled, " forgive me, but don't ask questions. You misunderstand me. Now please run off to Mark and keep him quiet ; I may need him later, and if I do he will have to be as nearly at his best as possible. Where is he now ? "

" Upstairs in his room, I think."

" Go and find him. And don't let anybody disturb me for a little while."

Mrs. Norton rose obediently. She moved towards the stairs, but stopped half-way.

" You'll excel yourself, won't you, Oliver ? Remember, the happiness of those two young people rests in your hands."

" I shall do my best. Of that you may be sure."

Weir answered gruffly. He had a horror of sentiment of any sort, and Mrs. Norton's words seemed to him to reek of sentiment. Of course he would do his best !

He went out into the garden, and walked a little way. He saw a garden seat in front of him, and sat down upon it. The sun was still high in the heavens, and still sufficiently warm to make him forget the absence of his coat.

" Somebody is monkeying with the legend ! "

he said to himself. "Somebody *is* hiding behind it, and that somebody is not Joan. When Julia heard that bell, Joan was rehearsing a proposal with Mark. Oh, thank the Lord for that!"

He rubbed his hands together; then suddenly became serious.

"Now, let me see. I have established that on two occasions a bell was rung, a bell which was supposed to be the Reaper's. Nobody in the house could have done it; therefore someone outside did. What about my friend of the wood? Very probably. This bell was heard inside the house; it wasn't rung inside the house, therefore it must have been rung very near the house to have been heard inside so softly. Where? Now, to be seen ringing a bell would be to ask for trouble. An outhouse? The garden shed! Gosh, yes! The sickle! That was the sickle in the garden shed."

He was on his feet in an instant, running for all he was worth towards the house end of the garden, where the shed was situated. He burst through the door, and looked about him. The sickle was no longer in its accustomed place.

"Ha!"

Weir put a wealth of triumph into the single syllable. Then he looked around him for something else, something he would have

given half his life to find. There was nothing even like a bell anywhere in the shed.

His eyes came to rest on a long iron bar. For a moment he remained motionless, staring at the bar, racking his memory for something which he knew was there, something which he could not summon to the forefront of his mind.

"Gas!"

The single word escaped him. He remembered now reading it in the papers during the war. On several occasions a suspended piece of iron had been used as a gas alarm, to give out a bell-like tone.

The Professor lifted up the bar, held it at arm's-length. Very gingerly he struck it with a smaller piece of metal which was lying handy. The sound of the Reaper's bell reached his ears as if from a great distance.

"Back to the seat!" Weir was speaking to himself again. "Back to the seat! I must think!"

He hurried back, sat down again, and buried his head in his hands:

"Not the gardener? Of course not! Now don't lose your head in your excitement! Steady, you old sleuth! What was it that Beamish said? Always look for the motive. Now, who benefits? Joan indirectly through Mark. Joan out. Mark? He didn't ring the

bell. Out too, thank God. But who else? The estate of course. It wouldn't have done too well with Lionel or Guy in charge, but an estate can't commit two murders. Then . . . gosh!"

The Professor sat bolt upright. An idea had come to him, an idea so fantastic that he scarcely liked to credit it. Then, little by little he realised it fitted, fitted admirably. The man had always struck him as a little mad, the family had worked for the estate through many generations, and . . . more than anyone else, the man must know all about the legend.

"Ha!"

Again a wealth of triumph crept into the monosyllable.

"But I must be sure. How can I make sure?"

For a long minute he sat motionless. Then, abruptly, he rose from his seat. He cast a quick glance to the sky: clouds were rolling up, soon the late autumn sun would cease to warm the earth for another day.

He hurried to the house, put on a hat and overcoat, and started to walk briskly down the drive.

WEIR turned in through the little wooden gate of the cottage near the Lodge. He walked up the gravel path, and, unhesitating, knocked at the door. A moment later it was opened to him.

" Ah ! Good evening, Morland."

" Good evening, Mr. Weir."

There was a pause. Weir looked at the man in front of him, the agent of the estate, noted the high cheek-bones, the bright but sunken eyes, the unhealthy pallor of the face. All these things he noted mentally.

" May I come in for a moment ? "

Just for a second Morland hesitated. Then he stepped aside.

" Certainly."

Weir passed him, and went into the little living-room. Morland followed.

" Will you sit down ? "

" Thank you."

Morland took a silver box from the side-board.

" Cigarette ? "

" Thank you, no."

" D'you mind if I do ? "

Weir smiled.

" Of course not."

He watched the man take out a cigarette from the box and light it with a match. His actions, to Weir, seemed nervous, seemed jerky. The Professor noted, not without a little thrill of excitement, that the man's hand was unsteady, that the match shook ever so little in his fingers.

" Yes, Mr. Weir ? "

Morland had seated himself in front of Weir, on the other side of a table.

" I've come to see you about . . . about the estate. Of course, Sir Mark should really be doing it, but . . . Well, you can imagine his condition at the moment."

" Why ? He didn't care for his cousins, did he ? "

The question startled Weir.

" Eh ? Well, I don't know. But it's not that. You know they've arrested Miss Joan ? "

" Arrested Miss Joan ? Whatever for ? "

" The murder of her brothers."

" What ! "

The exclamation was barked out. Weir noticed that Morland was even more pale than usual, that his eyes were almost unduly bright. He suddenly felt acutely uncomfortable.

" She was going to marry Mark," he said simply.

The other did not answer him for a moment.

When he did, his words could scarcely be heard :

" This will never do ! "

Weir jumped on them at once.

" Of course it won't. We are sure—we who know Joan—that she is incapable of these ghastly crimes. But the police hold a different view. I don't think one can blame them. They have a clear case against her, even though it is absurd from our point of view. But it must be stopped."

" Yes, it must be stopped."

" How can we do it ? " Weir paused for a moment to let his words sink in. " I think we'd better have a conference. I'm asking Detective-Inspector Beamish to come up to the house at six. You'll come, of course. We must convince him of Joan's innocence."

" I'll come."

Weir smiled to himself. He felt relieved ; he had not thought that Morland would have consented to come with such little persuasion. And Morland's presence that night was essential.

" Good. At six precisely, then."

Weir got up to leave. Morland accompanied him to the door.

" It's a terrible business," remarked the Professor, " a terrible business ! "

" Not so bad as all that, surely ? "

"Eh?"

Weir turned round sharply. Morland was smiling at him; somehow to smile just then struck the old man as strange.

"Mark Thorold will make a fine laird."

"Yes." Weir fell in with the other's mood. "Yes, he will. But for three to inherit within twenty-four hours!"

"Two worthless men, Dr. Weir, who would have done nothing except harm to Carshalton. Think of it! Think of this wondrous place allowed to go to rack and ruin through neglect! Trees razed to the ground, and sold to provide cash to squander. The place mortgaged, probably; or, worse still, sold. That I could not have borne!"

Weir looked at the agent. Something which he saw seemed to give him infinite satisfaction.

"Yes, yes. Perhaps all these things turn out for the best after the first shock has worn off. I'll see you at six, then?"

"Yes."

Weir made off at once to the village post office. He put through a call to London, and had not long to wait.

"Yes? Is that Sir Joseph Bryan's house? May I speak to him? Thank you."

He waited for a moment.

"Hallo? Is that you, Bryan? Oliver Weir at this end. Don't ask questions, just

answer. If a man is mad on one subject only, could something bring on the madness if it were an integral part of his moments of madness, so to speak. Yes, something that always happens when he is mad. . . . Yes, yes. It would? Good. Thank you so much, old man. Good-bye."

The old Professor left the post office and made for the police station with a light step. Sir Joseph Bryan, old friend and famous mental specialist, had done much to soothe the awful anxiety of the last few hours.

THE REAPER CHAPTER IX

THE Professor beamed upon his small audience. Mrs. Norton sat on his left, as she had done the previous evening in the study. On his right sat Mark Thorold, pale but composed. Just in front of him a candle rested on a small table, giving the only light in the room.

"I apologise for the lack of light," the Professor was smiling benignly as he was speaking, "but the fact is that the lights have fused . . . not surprising after the recent events in this room."

He paused. He looked at Beamish sitting opposite, at Morland, the agent, beside him.

" But I like candles, don't you ? "

Weir shot the question at Morland, and at the same time watched him closely.

" Why ? "

The Professor smiled.

" I doubt whether it would interest you. Candles are so different one from the other ; one burns brightly from start to finish, another flutters and dies out before it has burnt halfway. It's a question of their quality, their worth."

He paused again.

Now that he had come to the great moment the old man was almost afraid to put his theory to the test. What if it failed him ? What if Joan remained in that prison cell—to face her trial, a trial which could only end in one way ?

The sweat was breaking out upon his forehead in great beads. Weir made a physical effort, took a grip of himself. It would never do to fail now, to fail the girl he had learnt to love. He seemed to see before him in the darkness the face of her dead father, pleading, pleading with him not to fail.

Weir looked around him. The small ring of anxious faces peered at him, seemed to be hanging on his words.

Suddenly he spoke in a low voice, his eyes half closed, his expression one almost of a

person in a trance, yet the words came clearly to those four people sitting round him.

" The Reaper was riding round his fields and suddenly came across a man who was cutting some of the ripe corn with the evident intention of stealing it. They argued ; the man dared to be rude, to be abusive, whereupon the Reaper, snatching from the man's grasp the sickle . . ."

He stopped abruptly. In the silence which ensued no sound could be heard.

As if from a great distance, the sound of a bell came to their ears. For a moment nothing happened ; then Morland leapt to his feet.

" What's that ? "

His voice was hoarse, his eyes were shining in the half light. He was staring at Weir with an intensity which the Professor could almost feel.

" It is the Reaper's bell, tolling for the death of two Peregrines and of their murderer ! "

Weir spoke the words deliberately, in a voice of thunder. But even he was scarcely prepared for the result which attended them.

Slowly, almost with a conscious determination which sickened those watching him, Morland began to move his right hand. The fingers were crooked, resembled nothing so much as a claw as he raised them to the level

of his throat. He let out a hiss as his hand touched his throat, a hiss of such diabolical malignancy that Weir recoiled in his seat quite involuntarily.

Then, in a low tone which nevertheless carried to the ears of all his listeners, Morland began to speak. He was mad, obviously mad. But there was such dignity in his bearing, such a wealth of sincerity apparent in his voice, that even Detective-Inspector Beamish hesitated to interrupt him :

" Yes, I killed them. I have done my work, been faithful to my trust ! Carshalton Hall shall not be mortgaged by Sir Lionel nor sold by Sir Guy ! I have been faithful to the Reaper, faithful to his law ! "

Beamish rose from his seat.

" I arrest . . ."

" No ! " Morland's voice rose to a scream. " What I have done I have done well. I was the instrument of Destiny, and to you, Mark Thorold, on Destiny's behalf I now commit this corner of England. All it has been, all it will be, it is all yours. Be worthy of your trust, you and your people. I have done my duty and saved Carshalton. No tribunal shall arraign me, no bewigged fools shall indict me. . . . I go on my journey ! "

There was a moment of stupefied silence. There had been something almost grand in the

poor demented creature's farewell, perhaps because of its transparent sincerity. Morland took advantage of this moment of paralysis.

Like a flash he was across the room and at the foot of the stairs. Beamish was the first to recover, the first to follow. But he was much too late ; Morland rushed up the stairs. The first floor window was open before him : Morland took it in his stride.

THE REAPER CHAPTER X

" YES, my dear," the Professor linked his arm through Mrs. Norton's. " I thought I could trust Thomas, being a butler, to be punctual. The rest merely meant an accurate synchronisation of our watches. But I must say I think I timed it rather well ; how awful if I hadn't finished when he rang the bell ! "

The old man wiped his spectacles.

" Come into the study, my dear. She'll be back in a minute and . . . we'd better leave the stage clear for Mark, don't you think ? "

He sighed. But there are sighs and sighs. This one contained a hint of tiredness a hint of pride, a hint of pleasure.

THE FORCING HOUSE

FOR the sixth time I glanced at my watch, only to remember even as I did so that the hands had stopped long since. With a shudder of distaste I stared at the road before me, winding like some serpentine creation on a Chinese screen, up the stark brow of a most unpleasant-looking hill. Twilight was fast giving place to night, a night which promised to be both wet and windy, for storm-racked clouds were already swirling across the sky, in which no glint of moon had yet ventured to appear. On either side of me fields and meadows stretched away into the distance, while beyond lay that most precipitous-looking hill up whose sides it was my doom to climb.

I had been walking since early dawn: it was now late in the evening and I had no inkling as to my whereabouts; rain was beginning to fall; I was in urgent need of food and drink; but above all these things, and far transcending them in degree of discomfort, I was most unspeakably tired . . . tired to the point almost of a stupefied numbness. Somewhere upon my way I had mistaken my direction; of that I had been convinced many hours ago, but where I was now and whether

I should attain the welcome shelter of an inn to spend the night were questions which, in my state of dulled fatigue, I dared not ponder. My first walking tour—I vowed it despondently—should be my last ; my feet were never meant to bear my weight so long.

Again, with the mechanical repetition of stupefied weariness, I glanced at the set hands upon my watch, then stared before me at that loathsome hill. There was nothing for it ; up that hill I must go ; perhaps on the other side I might meet with men once more, and the thought spurred my tired limbs into a renewed pretence of energy.

Had I known then how prophetic was that thought, and the manner and kind of men I was soon to meet, not even my desperate need of food and shelter would have driven me to mount two paces up that hill ; the knowledge would have sent me speeding from the spot with a panic haste. But destiny leads us blindfold to our fate : blindfold and trusting we walk upon our way ; and thus it was that with no foreboding of impending danger, no qualms of instinctive fear, my eyes stared down into the shadowy land below me and caught the twinkling brilliance of a light gleaming between the trees, when at last I reached the summit. Instead of horror the sight filled me with delighted pleasure. It

was not merely the downward path which caused my feet to move so swiftly along that hill. I was in luck at last; for, although as yet I could see no house—hidden as it was from the road by the dense woods before it—I felt assured that the light which continued to twinkle with inviting promise could come but from a dwelling beyond those trees.

And then a strange thing happened; for even as I watched it the light was extinguished. One moment it was shining and I was near to food and shelter: the next . . . it was out and I once more upon a lonely road, miles from anywhere, cold and tired and without direction. The jolt was so sudden that for a second I stood stock-still in utter consternation; for a moment only, however, for with a welcome return of common sense I realised that although the light had gone yet it most certainly had been shining, and the fact remained that some dwelling lay beyond those woods. I wonder sometimes whether it was my good or evil genius which had forced me to mount that hill a moment or so too soon; for had I been but a little later the light would not have beckoned me to my fate and the house of the shuttered windows would to me have remained unknown.

As it was, I stumbled eagerly along the side of the road from which the light had come,

scanning the thickness of the trees for some sign of habitation, some drive leading to a house beyond. But there was none. No rail, no pathway, no stone-supported gate; and had it not been for a certain doggedness in my nature that forced me to prove my eyesight not at fault I should have felt inclined to dismiss the whole thing as a flight of fancy and continue drearily upon my way. The doggedness prevailed, however, and thus, having reached to the end of the little wood, fields and meadows meeting my eyes again on every side, I decided to trust to my resolve and force my way through the trees to see what lay beyond. If no house . . . well, the wood might provide some shelter from the wind and the rain, which was now descending in increasing torrents. Without more ado I made my way gingerly between the trees, forcing a passage through their forbidding branches. At first the way was very difficult, but gradually, almost imperceptibly, the branches began to thin, and after I had struggled through the undergrowth for perhaps five minutes I came upon a clearing . . . and beyond this lay a house.

But what a house! Even as I stood there, triumphant at the sudden ending of my search, a load, grim and impalpable, seemed to fall upon my heart and stifle exultation. For

there was something about this house, set like a forgotten barrack in the loneliness of the wood, which froze all pleasure from my mind, filling me, in spite of myself, with a curious, inexplicable fear.

It was immense: long and narrow, and studded with innumerable tiny leaden shutters which gave to it a formidable appearance as of some armoured fort; for the shutters were so tiny that I felt sure the windows behind them must be mere slits within the brickwork, slits as in a building made for war. A gravel drive wound round the house, but I could see no door or archway by which to obtain admittance. Not a reassuring dwelling-place on which to stumble at night-time in a lonely wood.

For a moment the idea actually flitted through my mind to leave the grim mansion to its shuttered quiet; but then that accursed doggedness reasserted itself once more, and I laughed the thought to scorn. I had searched for the house: I had found it. Was I to take to flight simply because its mode of architecture failed to appeal?

With a sudden furtiveness which the place seemed to engender, I stepped softly on to the gravel of the drive and walked gently around the house. My feet, crunching the loose pebbles as I moved, seemed to break, with

outrageous noise, the oppressive quiet that hung about it like a pall. No sound other than that made by the wind and the creaking branches of trees reached my ears : the place might have been an outpost of the dead, an ambush of the damned—and in that, although I did not know it at the time, I was almost incredibly near to the truth.

It took me a few minutes to reach the side of the house, but the wall beyond it was but a third of its length ; thus in a few moments more I had followed the drive to what was, apparently, the front of the building, and was standing in a small porch, staring, with a dawn of comprehension, at a shuttered grille upon the iron-studded door. That little grille dispelled my dim forebodings, explained in an instant the shuttered windows, the unnerving quiet which lay about the house. For that it was some monastery or convent I had chanced upon I did not doubt ; and with the thought a wave of longing to have done with this discomfort, to be once more at ease in mind and body, surged over me. A heavy iron knocker hung above my head, and with a quick movement I lifted it, almost jumping with a return of fright as a noisy clanging shattered the silence.

Even as the knocker fell from my hand, even as I took a step backward from the door

to await its opening, I heard a sound which startled me to the cores of my being, a sound so full of despair and frenzied horror as to freeze me into an instant immobility. With staring eyes and a sudden chill paralysing my limbs I waited breathless for the sound to be repeated. And it came again . . . a scream long-drawn-out and horrible, a scream in which was something almost profane, something from which a certain human element was most damnably missing. For a second the night seemed to hold no other sound, and then, with a suddenness which suggested abrupt interference, it died away . . . and once more the shadows of the evening seemed to close around me.

I shivered; but although my clothes were soaked with rain it was no physical cold that caused this shiver. Suddenly my stunned immobility vanished; on the instant all my distaste of this house returned in violent panic and I turned to flee. But it was too late; for even as I did so I saw the shutter of the grille before me shoot away and two eyes, cold and malevolent, glared balefully at me through the bars. A second later and, with a sickening dread at my heart, I saw the great door swing open and a man move out into the porchway. For a moment or two he stared at me loweringly. There was a certain savageness about

his mien, a lawless contempt in the eyes that met my own, which did nothing to relieve my fears. I remember noticing that he was in no monastic garb; this was no sanctuary of a holy order upon which I had stumbled.

In my distress of mind I flew to speech, and in some curious way the sound of my own voice, something familiar in these macabre surroundings, somewhat dispelled my fears; it was with a forced semblance of ease that I made my explanation.

"I . . . I hope you'll forgive me troubling you," I said somewhat breathlessly, "but the fact is . . . I've lost my way . . . and . . . and I was wondering if you would be kind enough to tell me how far I am from the nearest village."

I stopped and waited for the man to reply. But instead he stood there staring at me, his eyes, evil and malignant, seeming to read into my very brain to guess my purpose there. For a few moments the silence endured, and then again, with a slightly lessened intensity, there came a scream, this time ending suddenly in a series of stifled moans. Never for one moment did the man take his eyes away from me, and at last, unable to bear the silence any longer, I went on breathlessly:

"I'm afraid you're in trouble. Can I . . . can I help?"

To this day I have no notion why I was prompted to make this idiotic offer. Instead of offering assistance, all that I yearned to do was to place as great a distance as possible between myself and the grim mansion which stretched before me. Yet, to my infinite surprise and consternation, I heard my voice speaking the words, and on the instant the man replied :

" Help ? " he said, and his voice was harsh and coarse, like the croaking of a corn-crake. " Help ? . . . well "—he stopped and looked me over carefully, appraisingly, rather as though the tattered, dilapidated appearance of my clothing provoked his approval—" well, perhaps you can. . . . Yes, perhaps you can. Come in ! "

Stepping aside, with a wave of his hand he indicated the hall behind him and waited for me to pass.

But this was exactly what I had no desire to do. Only a portion of the hall could I see : a polished parquet floor, no rugs, no carpet ; a chill atmosphere hung about the place. With a semblance of reluctance at such an intrusion I turned to the man.

" I don't think I'd better, if you don't mind," I muttered anxiously. " The fact is . . . it's rather late, and I don't want to trouble you . . . Also . . ."

But I got no further.

With a determination for which I had not bargained the man stepped to my side.

"Come in," he said roughly.

His fingers, strong as steel, fixed upon my arm, and in a moment or so I found myself piloted through the bare hall into a room which opened from it on the right. I stared around me nervously, and as I did so I heard a key turn in the door.

I was locked in.

For a second a wave of panic swept over me —those screams had unnerved me more than I had thought—but in a moment more this feeling was replaced by an uncontrollable anger. How dare he lock me in like that! Turning back to the door I banged my fists upon it, banged loudly . . . but without making the slightest sound.

And then I noticed a strange thing. For the walls of the room were thickly padded, the door itself having a covering of heavy felt. What in heaven's name was this place into which I had so blandly walked? I stared again at the room and was amazed by its bareness. A table and two chairs stood near the empty grate, but there was no carpet on the floor, no curtains at the windows, which, as I had surmised, were but slits within the brickwork, tapering away in the shape of an

inverted V to a thickness of at least a foot. What *was* this place ?

Even as I wondered, the door behind me opened and a man, tall, slim and immaculately dressed, entered the room. He glanced at me a moment as though in surprise, and then the door was closed behind him. For a few seconds we stared at each other silently, and then I could bear the cool impassivity of his gaze no longer.

With an assumption of ease I again ventured my explanation for this late intrusion and asked if he would be kind enough to direct me on my way. I stopped speaking and waited, more nervously than I cared to understand, for the man's reply. It was long in coming, for he continued to stare at me coldly while several moments passed, and when at last he spoke his answer was entirely unexpected.

" You are alone . . . quite alone ? " he asked.

The words were spoken quietly, gravely almost, in a voice which was cultured and pleasant, a voice which after the rough accents of the man who had opened the door should have been welcome in my ears ; but in some curious way I did not get this impression. There was a certain implacable, steely edge to his words, an inhuman coldness in his

tone, which warned me, with a deadly clarity, that the place upon which I stood was dangerous ground.

"You are alone . . . quite alone?" he repeated slowly.

With many forebodings as to my safety in so doing, I acknowledged the fact, because I could do nothing else.

"Good." I could see that my assurance pleased him. "And you have lost your way? Er . . . were you going anywhere in particular . . . or just tramping the roads?"

He stopped and stared at me fixedly. I could make no guess as to the purpose of these questions, but, believing that the less I told about myself the better, I gave him replies which I now realise must have misled him.

"Just tramping the roads," I answered curtly.

Several other questions did he ask me, to all of which I made short, vague replies, giving him the direct impression that I was entirely down on my luck, walking the roads in search of a job. Looking back on it now I can think of no actual lie that was embodied in my answers; his questions themselves were so evasively put that it was not difficult, by omission, to create a wrong impression. I little knew that with every word I spoke I might have been helping to build about me a living grave.

At last his supply of questions came to an end and I ventured one in return.

"I heard some terrible screams just now," I said haltingly. "Is there someone ill? Have you . . . ?"

He stared at me smilingly, a cold evil smile which froze the questions on my tongue.

"You heard someone screaming," he said quietly. "Yes . . . I'm afraid I heard it too." He paused. "Well . . . and what of it?"

His smile became more fixed and mirthless, and I hastened to placate him.

"Oh, nothing . . . nothing . . . only I . . . I wondered whether I might be of help."

Again my tongue, following some mechanical repetition in my brain, forced me to make that absurd proffer of help.

Even as I said it, almost as though in answer to my words, there came another scream, despairing and uncanny, as though the souls of all the damned had found a means by which to voice their sufferings. The sound struck me dumb. I stood staring incredulously at the man before me on whose thin, cruel lips that unholy smile still lingered. And then something happened, something for which I shall be grateful all my days, something which snatched me back from the very

edge of the precipice up to which I had so blindly walked.

The door was suddenly flung open, and into the room there rushed a girl . . . but such a girl! I had little time to notice much, but she was small and dainty, with eyes of the deepest sapphire blue, and a mass of most wonderful hair reaching to her shoulder in a tangled wealth of gold; she lit up the bare greyness of that room like a ray of sunshine in a prison yard, and for the first time that night I felt the soiled tatters of my clothes become a sore embarrassment. But not even for a passing moment did her eyes fall upon me. She swung into the room like some creature from another sphere, and marched, with quick strides, up to my companion. I could see that she was grievously upset, and when she spoke her voice, almost inarticulate with rage, quivered with that uncertain tremor which threatens at any instant to lose itself in tears.

"What *are* those screams? Why don't you stop them? *Why don't you stop them?* It's cruel . . . *cruel* . . ."

But she got no further.

At her entrance the smile had vanished entirely from those cruel-looking lips, and now the man caught her firmly by the arm and glared down at her with flashing eyes.

"How dare you . . . . how *dare* you come

in here ? " His voice was no louder than a whisper, but this very fact gave it a detestable quality that struck fear into my heart. " How dare you disturb me in this ridiculous manner ? Go back to your room at once, or . . ."

But, with a visible effort, the girl had torn her eyes away from his, and she was staring at me now, staring with an expression on her face, a medley of so much pity and horror that the sight appalled me. She turned once more to the man beside her, and bursting in upon his speech motioned towards me tremblingly.

" Is he another ? " she cried, and her voice was now entirely uncontrolled. " You've got him here because he's poor . . . because he's a tramp . . . to make him . . ."

But before she could finish that sentence a hand closed firmly over her mouth, and with a quick movement she was led, almost dragged, across the room and pushed outside, the great door shutting upon her with an ominous clang.

For a long moment neither of us spoke. I was thinking rapidly : the last few words that the girl had spoken had given me a keen appreciation of the danger in which I stood ; I must disillusion him at once as to my social standing—my life, I felt convinced of it, rested on that. So, before he was able to voice the words which I could see were trembling on his lips I broke in quickly :

"I wonder if you would mind my telephoning to my brother." I spoke with as great an assumption of calm as I could muster. "I'd like him to send a car to fetch me. . . . I'm afraid I don't fancy those wet roads any more to-night!"

For the first time that evening I felt that my words had definitely shocked my companion out of his watchful calm. His lips tightened visibly, and for a long moment his eyes, cunning and merciless, regarded me intently. Then he spoke, and his voice, in spite of myself, made me shiver inwardly. There was the same intensity of malice with which he had spoken to the girl, but in this case it was increased a hundredfold.

"I thought you gave me to understand you were destitute," he said slowly, each word seeming to cut the air like sharpened steel. "How does it happen, then, that you have a brother who can provide a car?"

He advanced closer to me, and summoning all my courage I answered him coolly enough, although my heart was beating rapidly.

"I'm afraid you must have misunderstood me. So far, thank God, I certainly am not destitute, but if these taxes go on . . ."

I laughed uneasily.

"Why did you lie to me?"

The words were full of venom, of restrained

fury, and in some curious manner they set fire to the anger that fear had caused to lie dormant in my mind. I turned on him now with a degree of hauteur which, I felt inwardly, the condition of my apparel in no way warranted.

"I did not call here to be insulted," I answered coldly, "merely to inquire a direction. You subjected me to a series of singularly impertinent questions which I consider such an inquiry did not call for. My name is Dermott; my brother is Sir Edwin Dermott of Dermott Motors, and up to this evening I was on a walking tour entirely for my pleasure. But I really cannot understand why my personal history should be of the slightest importance to you, Mr. . . . ?"

I paused and waited, on the surface calm, but inwardly a prey to grave misgivings, for my sudden access of rage had begun to cool. For a minute or two he surveyed me thoughtfully, and then a different expression altogether transformed his face. He became on the instant genial and courteous, the anger fled from his eyes, the malice from his mouth, but nothing could quite conceal the cruel thinness of those lips.

"My name is Gordon," he said, "and I must apologise for what I am afraid you must consider gross discourtesy. But the fact is,

Mr. Dermott "—and here his manner waxed unduly confidential—" we get some strange callers here . . . especially at night. You see, this place is . . . is . . . a nursing home . . . for chronic nervous cases—I specialise in such. In many instances my patients are completely mad, so, you see "—and a smile again lit up the handsome contours of his face—" my examination was not entirely unforgivable."

I smiled in response, although to my mind his reasoning was erratic.

" Of course not, Mr. Gordon," I answered quickly, " perfectly understandable. So that's what this place is! And that accounts for the screams, of course? And for the strange behaviour of that girl, no doubt? "

I did not believe him for a single moment, but my plight was too serious to permit of frankness, and, as I had hoped it would, my immediate acceptance of the situation as portrayed by him met with an instant approval.

" One of my worst cases," he sighed profoundly. " And she is my only daughter too."

I expressed commiseration, and then, with a quick return to his former geniality, he told me, with regret, that there was no telephone installed in the place, but that he would have great pleasure in placing a car at my disposal.

"My own chauffeur shall drive you," he added quickly.

I hesitated. Perhaps here was yet another trap, perhaps . . . But there was no alternative. Without appearing unduly suspicious—a thing which I sensed would be fatal—there was no apparent reason for my refusal—the offer was too eminently acceptable—so with an appearance of gratitude I thanked him warmly.

On the instant he turned to the wall and pressed a small bell upon it; immediately the door was thrust open and my friend the doorkeeper lurched into the room.

"Take this gentleman to the garage and tell Chard he is to drive him to . . . ?"

He stopped and looked at me inquiringly.

"The nearest railway station," I put in curtly.

I had no desire to go farther in his car than was absolutely essential.

He nodded towards the man and then turned to me with outstretched hand, and again that unnaturally genial smile lit up his face.

"Well, good evening, Mr. Dermott, and I hope you'll get home safely. You must forgive me if I leave you now. . . . I have many things to attend to."

Murmuring further expressions of thanks I

pressed his hand, shuddering inwardly at the clammy, unwholesome touch of his fingers.

Then with a remarkable swiftness, I found myself piloted by the gaunt doorkeeper outside the building and I heard the door clang to behind me. A wave of intense relief surged up within me at the mere feeling of fresh air upon my brow, the mere realisation that I had left the villainous atmosphere within those walls and was once more beneath God's sky. The rain had stopped, but a cool breeze was blowing, and, like the sympathetic reaction of mercury to all conditions, my spirits rose with a bound. But I was not out of the wood yet . . . in either sense.

My companion led me swiftly to the third narrow side of the house which I had not before glimpsed, and I saw that half the wall consisted of an enormous iron-studded door, similar to the shutters. As I stared at it some inner mechanism must have been operated, for the doors swung apart, folding up on either side into receptacles. It all happened with such amazing rapidity that I was filled with curiosity. How was the thing manipulated ? By electricity—or by some mechanical lever ? And why so enormous a garage ? For I could see that it stretched far back and that it was crowded thickly with cars . . . or were they lorries ?

But I had no time in which to indulge my curiosity any further. A long, expensive-looking saloon car, complete with chauffeur, swung out on to the gravel of the drive, and in an instant I was bundled into the back, the cold, evil eyes of the doorkeeper regarding me balefully. Then the car was started, and with increasing joy I felt the ground slip rapidly beneath us, as we swept forwards towards a narrow drive leading through the wood. I was determined to make a careful note of my surroundings, as apparently this drive must lead to a main road on the other side of the thicket —there had certainly been no pathway leading to that road down which I had tramped not so very long before.

But suddenly, as my eyes peered through the trees, eager to note any outstanding and memorable feature, a strange pricking made them tingle, and turning back to the car in which I sat I noted, with a growing fear, that a yellow mist was diffusing upwards from some contrivance in the seat beside the driver. I tried to move . . . to call out . . . to breathe . . . but I could do nothing. The mist was becoming thicker at every moment, and suddenly I saw the chauffeur turn round and glance towards me where I sat huddled in the corner. Through the mist his appearance was devilish, reminiscent of the fiendish ogres

which used to haunt my childish nights ; for upon his features was drawn a fantastic gas-mask of gargoyle design, and as I sensed its sinister meaning despair clutched at my heart.

I fell forward . . . senseless.

. . . . .

Dawn was breaking—a cold watery-looking dawn—when at last I opened my eyes again and stared about me. The light was torture to my aching eyelids, and after a tentative glance around my eyes closed again almost without my willing. For a long while I lay motionless, but through my mind thoughts, confused and chaotic, were whirling in a head-achy turmoil, gradually slowing up to form one coherent question. Where was I now ? With throbbing head, parched throat and stinging eyelids, fragmentarily I recalled the events that had led up to my present condition. The house in the wood . . . the car . . . the gas . . . and with a sudden sharp sensation of relief I realised that I had escaped indeed. . . . I was alive . . . alive, though perhaps a trifle battered. I laughed . . . and at once became serious. My parched lips did not admit of laughter.

Again—gingerly this time—I opened my eyes and stared around. I was lying in a field beneath the tangled branches of a flowering

hedge, and on the other side of this there lay a road . . . a high-road ; for even as I listened I could hear cars passing at a rapid speed. With the sound a great longing came to me to lie once more within the comforting linen of my own bed secure from harm. A cowardly thought, perhaps, but my head was not now in that happy state that makes for heroism.

Rising with pain, I groped my way through the hedge of briars and hailed the next car that came into view. I was fortunate in my choice : my luck, evidently, had turned at last. It was a large and fast touring car that stopped for me, and the driver was a young man of pleasing appearance who agreed to my request for a lift without so much as questioning me. For this I was profoundly thankful, for I was in no mood to explain matters, and had I been pressed I don't know what I would have said. The events of the previous night had been so amazing, so totally out-of-the-ordinary that I felt had I retailed them the youth would scarcely have credited my story, and I had no alternative tale to produce for the moment. My head was aching far too much to enable me to think coherently and evolve a suitable substitute.

My new friend offered to take me to the nearest railway station, but on hearing that I wished to get to London he announced that he

himself was going there and would be glad to give me a lift to my own flat. I was astonished to find that the journey took well under an hour; evidently I had been left on the previous night—left for dead, perhaps—some way, some considerable way, from the house of ill-omen.

THE FORCING HOUSE CHAPTER II

THE return to my flat was as unexpected to my staff as it was to myself. I use the word "staff" a little optimistically perhaps, for it was composed of one excellent old woman who came in daily to do for me. I had told her, on leaving for my walking tour, which had ended so abruptly and so unexpectedly, that I should be away for a full fortnight, and here I was, returned to London less than a week after leaving it. I was thankful for this fact, in spite of the absence of anyone to care for me, for I felt that I required a few hours in which to think over things and decide definitely what was my best course of action.

Actually, I went straight to bed on reaching my flat, and slept the clock round, so that it was again dark when I awakened feeling refreshed and very much the better for my rest.

I had just had the sense before getting into bed to remove my clothes, and these now were the first things to meet my eye on waking. Acting on some instinct, I had removed those articles which were normally in my pockets and had wound up my watch before retiring, for I have no recollection of doing so; and one of the first things to catch my eye on regaining consciousness was the sight of a folded piece of paper lying on my dressing-table together with my watch—which I was amused to notice I had wound—and a certain amount of loose change.

I took up this paper, rather surprised, wondering where it could have come from, and opened it. Written on it in pencil was a message. If I had ever entertained any doubt about the events of that evening—which my brain now seemed to regard rather as a fairy-story—the words which I saw written on this paper dispelled all incredulity. I had been inclined, on first awakening, to think that I had been the victim of a bad dream, but this paper, which I must automatically have removed from my pocket before going to bed that morning, and which quite obviously must have been placed there by the man who had driven me away from that house, dispelled any such comforting thought from my mind. It contained a warning, a definite warning:

" You were proceeding by road on a dark, overcast night when you lost your way and failed to find it again. Overcome by fatigue, fainting, perhaps, through lack of food, you lay down to sleep beside the hedge on the main road. It would be unwise to suppose that you had seen or talked to anybody other than in your dreams."

The note was unsigned, and as I looked at it a feeling of repugnance overcame me to such an extent that I did what I now realise to have been a very foolish thing. Taking a match-box from the mantelpiece I lit a match and burnt the paper. My desire at the time was to cut myself adrift from all thought of that ghastly experience through which I had passed, and I did my utmost to achieve this end during the next two or three days. But after a week had passed—a week during which the happenings of that eventful night had begun to assume the figment of a dream—I found myself no more settled in my mind. I could not rid my brain of the events of that night ; I could not rid myself of the face of that girl whom I had seen for so short a time but who had made so great an impression upon me ; I could not get out of my mind the look in her eyes in those few moments that I had seen them. There is no doubt that had it not been for that face which had so excited my

imagination, and also for the very painful evidence, which lasted for a day or two, of the gas with which I had been drugged, I would have dismissed it all from my mind as being some curious mental flight of imagination due to my tired condition on that eventful night—had there not been that paper.

But there was nothing imaginary about that gas, and I was compelled to obtain the assistance of my old friend, Dr. Ernstine. He questioned me as to its origin, and acting on an impulse I laid the whole story before him and asked for his advice. He gave it, but it was somewhat different from that for which I had hoped: freedom from mental strain, entire rest, fresh air and plenty of sleep ; there was small doubt as to his scepticism. Somewhat hesitantly now, for indeed I was beginning to disbelieve the tale myself, I told the story to several of my friends . . . with a like result. One and all regarded me closely, sympathetically almost, and in many cases with an urgent warning to refrain from wine.

In spite of this, however, when at last I had recovered sufficiently to be able to drive my car once more, I set out again on a fruitless search for that precipitous hill down which I had been tramping when I saw the light. But, although for over a week I pursued my object doggedly, it was all in vain ; the secret of that

shuttered house was well-preserved ; I could not trace any clue in the vast area which might hold the secret.

The days passed, and by now, except for occasional vivid glimpses in my dreams, the adventure of that momentous night was fading from my mind, helped considerably by the fact that of all my acquaintances I could yet find none sufficiently credulous to accept its truth.

And then something happened to recall it to me, something which, in a most amazing way, dismissed for ever those dawning doubts with which even I had begun to regard that night.

I had been invited to a ball given by one of my friends, and although no great lover of dancing, I had gone to it chiefly in an attempt to dispel the extraordinary tinge of boredom which of late had infected my days. There seemed to be—although I could think of no reason for its conception—a certain emptiness about my life, an ennui which I had found extremely trying. In an effort to recover my old buoyant zest again I had come to this ball-room . . . and I had been there no longer than ten minutes or so when my cure was achieved with the speed of a miracle.

For a miracle had happened ! Seated in an alcove, talking eagerly to my host of the

evening, I came upon a girl . . . a girl with a wealth of golden curls reaching down to her shoulder, whose eyes of the deepest blue looked into my own with an indifference which—or did I fancy it ?—changed on the instant into a puzzled frown of recognition. I saw her pause in her speech, stare at me once more, then turn quickly to her partner with the obvious question. He glanced up at me and smiled, but I waited for no more. I wanted to be alone . . . to think, and seizing the opportunity of an open door leading to the terrace, I stepped outside and into the garden.

I understood everything now. The girl I had seen on that memorable evening had been no figment of a heated mind. She was here . . . in the ball-room . . . within a few yards of where I stood, and, with a calm certainty which I knew nothing could ever shake, I realised that in her, and in her only, lay the one reason for my strange attack of boredom. For this had ceased entirely now . . . had been banished by her presence. . . . I was excited, feverishly excited, and, with a sudden fear lest the girl should vanish from my life once more, I returned hastily to the house, and finding my friend, besought an introduction.

An hour later, after several dances, we were seated on the terrace for a breath of fresh air. I had made no mention to my adorable partner

of the sinister circumstances of our last meeting; the moment, I felt, had not yet arrived. But now, with an ease with which destiny often prepares her pitfalls, the girl herself provided an opening.

"It's a funny thing," she said, and her face was thoughtful, "it's a funny thing, but although we've never met before, I can't help feeling that I've seen you somewhere. I wonder . . ."

I seized the moment.

"But we have met before," I said boldly, although my heart was beating quickly.

She stared at me in surprise.

"Surely not? I've never heard your name before . . . nor you mine."

I smiled at her.

"Janice Gordon," I repeated her name softly. "No, I've never heard it before . . . at least, not the first part . . . if I had . . . well, it's not a likely thing that I'd forget it, but"—and something of my inward turmoil must have become apparent in my voice, for she looked at me in wonder—"but we *have* met."

I stopped a moment, almost afraid to proceed, then the words came from me in a sudden rush.

"One night many weeks ago . . . in a room with padded walls . . . in a strange house with tiny leaden shutters, where . . ."

But, without waiting for any more, my companion—all the youth dashed from her face as wine from a tumbled glass—rose hastily to her feet, gave me one glance of frightful anguish, and fled from my side.

I was quick to follow, but not quick enough, for search though I did throughout the remainder of that evening I could catch no slightest trace of her dainty velvet gown. I cursed my rash folly at speaking about that night so soon—a curse which I was often to repeat throughout the days that followed. For my friend knew nothing of her save her name—which was not strange, for there had been over a hundred guests present at that ball, many of them—as was this girl—friends of his friends.

I will not linger on the days that followed . . . even now, at this great length of time, I cannot think of them without a shudder. Grey, empty of hope, filled with remorse and bitter self-rebuke, they dragged slowly on, while, with a worldly craving born of desperation, I plunged madly into that whirl of deadly gloom which men have called the whirl of Society. Balls, dances, parties . . . I attended them all, hoping, longing always to see that head of golden curls, those eyes of deepest blue.

As sometimes happens to reward the dogged

breed, when my last grain of hope was fast departing I got my reward. It was at a private soirée where very few were gathered together that we met again—and this time there was small chance of her escape. Her face had paled, her eyes deepened with fear when they met my own, and with compunction for I knew not what filling my heart, I hastened to make amends.

"Please do let us be friends," I implored her hurriedly, as soon as I was able to get her alone. "If I promise never to mention again where we first met . . . if I promise to try to forget it absolutely . . . couldn't we?"

I had struck the right note. She was silent a moment, as though weighing my sincerity; and then, with a sudden shrug of her shoulders, as though dismissing with joy the load that had lain upon them ever since my coming, she accepted the terms.

The days that followed were halcyon days for me . . . for her, too, I venture to hope. Not a morning passed without our meeting; not an afternoon but she came out in my car; not an evening but we went somewhere to eat and to dance. . . . The days dashed past on winged feet, and when they had numbered twenty or so we became engaged.

And then . . . with the inevitable jealousy of life to all who appear to be seizing more

than their fair share of gladness, the supply was ended.

" I must tell my father," she said, and with the saying a load fell upon my soul. Once more I saw that grim sinister-looking building ; once more I stood in the padded room and stared with horror at that cruel, smiling mouth. Her father ? Could it indeed be possible ? Since our meeting at that blessed soirée I had adhered strictly to my word : no mention had been made between us of the events of that momentous night ; no mention of the man whose name she bore. But now the end had come ; the facts, such as I knew them, had to be faced.

As I kissed her good-bye that night Janice clung to me fearfully as at a sudden premonition of what the future held. Many days and nights were destined to pass before I kissed those lips again ; a merciful veil hid from our eyes the grim events of our next meeting, the devilish horrors which must intervene before our fate was sealed.

For on the next day I heard no word from Janice herself ; instead, I received a phone call from her father, telling me in words of whose deadly meaning I did not question that not on any account must I try to meet with her again. If I did so my life would be in danger of something far worse than death.

" As it is . . . " he said, and his voice was sharp as steel, but the sentence was never completed. Leaving me to ponder over the grim significance of these words, he slammed the receiver down and left me to my thoughts.

They were bitter indeed. Increasingly bitter when the next morning I received a tiny heart-broken note from Janice herself, telling me that for my sake we must not meet again. Faithful to my compact, I had never asked for her address, never probed in any way into the background of her life. And this very fidelity was now costing me dear ; for I had lost her . . . lost her when to lose was to become destitute of all that made my life worth living.

With the genius of utter despair I went that afternoon to the chambers of my friend Robert Ingles. Dimly I felt that a solicitor might be of help in this disaster ; but in what way this proved to be the case I was yet to discover.

For the first time of its relation my adventure in that shattered house was listened to with a rapt attention, and when at last I had told Ingles of the threat which lay behind the unfinished sentence of that morning, " As it is . . ." his interest had become intense.

" But why on earth don't you go to the law about it ? " he asked me thoughtfully. " Why don't you get the police on the job ? "

"How can I?" Anxiety had made me querulous. "I've got no definite case against the man. . . . I know, with an absolute certainty, that something frightful, something devilish is going on in that house . . . but who's going to believe me? You, perhaps, though for the life of me I don't see why you should. But as for the police . . . and I don't know where the place is!" I paused. But I had to be entirely frank. "After all, the man *is* her father, and I don't think it would raise me in her eyes if I made the police arrest him."

Ingles stared at me thoughtfully for a moment.

"But if you do find this place, and it is carrying on some infamous trade . . . what do you propose to do then? Let the man escape because . . ."

I burst in upon him furiously.

"Don't be an utter fool . . . Of course I shouldn't, only—well, I think I'd prefer to deal with him in my own way. I don't fancy dragging the police into it, anyhow!"

Ingles glanced at me curiously.

"And why did you come to me?" he asked, and there was a note in his voice which I could not quite define. "How can *I* be of help to you?"

At the words, the utter hopelessness of the entire affair seemed to dance before my eyes

with a deadly clarity. I rose wearily to my feet and moved towards the door.

" I'm sorry," I said, " very sorry to have bothered you, Ingles. Of course you can't be of help . . . nobody can. But it's a relief to have told someone, and you're a friend."

Ingles had risen to his feet; he was smiling strangely.

" Nobody can help, perhaps," he said slowly, " nobody, perhaps, except one man . . . and if you'll wait just a moment I'll take you along to him ! "

He vanished into an inner office and issued abrupt instructions, leaving me in a state of bewildered excitement; then, returning to my side, he seized me by the arm and hastened down the stairs.

" I don't know where in the world we'll run Julian to earth," he muttered rapidly, " but you can take my word for it, Trevor, he's the only man in London who can be of help."

THE FORCING HOUSE CHAPTER III

" THAT is the man," said Ingles.

He enunciated these four single syllables very carefully, although I do not think that he was consciously doing so. He was

impressed—or so it seemed to me—at the very sight of a man whom he had presumably seen often before, since he called him by his Christian name. His eyes—I had glanced at them when he made his statement in order to follow their direction with my own—had assumed rather a sickening expression of reverence. I do not approve of reverence in a regard not directed towards a woman.

I followed the direction of his eyes. The restaurant was crowded, but he could be looking only at one table, for it was set rather apart from the others and very close to the band. One man only occupied it, sitting on a chair and watching the ever-increasing excitement of the little negro who was directing the tune and who seemed rapidly to be losing all control of his eyeballs, just as he had very evidently lost all control of the physical contortions which shook his frame in transport with the music.

"That is the man," said Ingles again.

I glanced back at my friend just to make sure that there could be no mistake. There was no mistake: Ingles obviously meant the lonesome diner.

But even then I was loth to believe it.

"That little . . . er . . . that little fellow sitting all alone and apparently absorbed in the contortionist?"

" That's him," said Ingles, apparently with relish.

I may be a fool—indeed my recent activities, which had caused all the bother and culminated in my visit to this night-club with Ingles, rather leads me to suppose that I am—but I have never been able to stand the sound of servile respect which was so apparent in the voice of the usually so prosaic solicitor, Robert Ingles. To me it savours of something rather like the hero-worship which most men leave behind them, with the pedestals, on leaving school and lose until they meet the girl who is destined to make or mar their lives. Then, of course, back comes the veneration, pedestals and all, but that I understand! Especially could I understand it at that moment!

I confess that I was annoyed, since, now that I had identified the object of our visit, I wanted either to laugh or to be very angry indeed with my friend Ingles. He had said there was one man in London, and one man only, who could help me in my strange and disturbing predicament, and after a long and hectic telephone search our quarry had been run to earth at Ciro's. But now that I was looking at him. . . .

Only the upper portion of his body could I see at that time, for the table and the cloth laid over it, and hanging almost to the polished

floor, effectually concealed his legs. He had a fairly large head. Growing on this head was a mass of beautifully curly brown hair. Quite nicely brushed. It rather gave the impression of studied carelessness: there was a wisp or two of curl carefully disarranged. Worth three or four love-affairs a year at least.

The features were small but very well defined; the actual face was definitely good-looking in the manner which has now come to be called aesthetic. The whole cast of it was feminine: a sharp, small nose and a round, small chin, smooth cheeks with pink spots, very thin eyebrows which gave the impression of being pencilled. He was clean-shaven, which allowed me, as observer, to be astonished by his mouth: it was rather full and, somehow, looked sensitively weak. Not the sort of mouth I expected to see on a man. His face was mobile and his lips were constantly working, to smile or pout or purse almost with girlish indignation. But even as I looked at him he half-opened them and smiled, and immediately I wanted to smile with him. And yet I had an unpleasant feeling that the smile was . . . not unnatural . . . not exactly not a visible message from some amusement in his brain . . . not really forced but purposely produced as a trick to impress, rather to attract notice. He wanted to smile all right,

and he did smile, but in the doing of it there was a whole world of unattractive mannerism.

Yet I wanted to smile with him.

And then his body : his shoulders were very square and gave the impression of that strength and manliness which were so lacking in his features, in spite of the fact that the tips seemed at that moment to fall inwards by reason of the stooping attitude, one elbow on the table, in which he was sitting. But thence downwards his body narrowed rapidly, startlingly rapidly, so that I could visualise a woman's hips, and a snake-like charmer's in a Molyneux creation at that !

He was wearing a too perfectly fitting double-breasted dinner-jacket, with a large, a very large, white carnation in the button-hole. He was playing with this flower with the fingers of his left hand as I watched him. The fingers—long, tapering, the snake-like charmer's fingers—fascinated me. I felt that I had never seen such beautiful fingers before—but such useless fingers for a man. Somehow they gave me the shivers, and I felt a well-nigh uncontrollable longing to call to him to stop playing with the flower. I also caught myself wishing that I had seen the fingers on a woman's hand.

Suddenly he looked down sideways, raised the lapel of his coat with two fingers, and

smelled the flower. An expression of dreamy contentment came to his eyes. I forgot the fascination of those fingers and felt slightly sick.

"That is the man," said Ingles reverentially.

"Come on," I said.

We walked across the floor, touring our way between the dancing couples, towards his table. He did not see us until we were only a few feet away from him, but when he did his reception of us was a miracle of vanity. He behaved precisely as if many faces were staring at him, faces tinged with wonder and with respect, and under their eyes he seemed to be warmed to a deep satisfaction with himself.

He half-rose from his seat. He did not rise altogether, nor did he remain seated. His arms were slightly bent at the elbows, and this alone made me want to laugh, because, quite irrelevantly, it made me think of Monkey Hill in Regent's Park.

And then he spoke :

"Why, Ingles ! Come and sit down—and your friend, of course. Here's a chair."

Hovering waiters had collected almost miraculously : two chairs were placed at the table and Ingles and I sat down, one on each side of him. But I was suffering from shock—the shock which his voice had created in me. It was so different from what I had expected,

so entirely out of keeping—except in one thing—with all that his appearance, his manner, and his vain, ridiculous pride had led me to anticipate.

In it there was no hint of affectation, no slightest trace of foppishness or self-conceit. He spoke slowly, quietly, and only in the meticulous precision with which he enunciated each syllable was there anything unusual or erratic. There was an amused undertone of laughter beneath all his words, an exhilarating delightful quality which commanded trust and banished all nervousness and dreary forebodings.

I caught myself looking at him in surprise, and wondered if a hint of that admiration which I had seen in Ingles' eyes and had so much disliked, was reflected in my own. But this impression was very rapid, for it occurred between the time that we sat down at that table and that Ingles effected the introduction.

"Julian," he said, "this is my friend Trevor Dermott."

Once again the vanity of this strange creature betrayed itself. For again he half-rose from his seat and again he gave the impression, without actually doing it, almost of bowing towards me.

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance," he said. And then, even as he lowered

himself once more into his seat, he made a thoroughly human remark. "What will you have to drink?" he asked with a smile. "We must be quick. This is a club where the licensing laws of this country are closely adhered to, and consequently we have but five minutes in which to make an order."

Ingles, never backward, positively galloped.

"Whiskey," he said.

I nodded.

The man Julian—whatever his surname was had not yet been divulged to me—ordered the drinks in a perfectly ordinary manner. This in itself rather astonished me. I had expected some flourish of trumpets to accompany the request to the waiter. But immediately afterwards he began to play with his flower again, caressing it almost, letting it rest against his cheek and seeming to find pleasure in the softness of the petals on his skin.

I had to take a check on myself. It was up to me, I told myself savagely, not to allow my personal likes or dislikes to frustrate the intervention of Ingles on my behalf with this strange little man, for I was in a desperate strait indeed. Ingles was my best friend, and therefore I knew him to be my best adviser, and if he said that this extraordinary Julian was the only man in London who could help me, it was essential that I should disregard

my personal feelings in the matter and solicit that help as earnestly as I could.

The drinks were brought to us while these thoughts flitted through my mind, and when I had helped myself and raised the glass to my lips I looked up towards my host, about to drink his health. As I did so I caught his eyes staring at me, and in them was a half-amused expression. He nodded as I drank to him and raised his own glass, then suddenly leaning forward over the table, so suddenly that I almost started, he pushed the lapel of his coat towards me with his left hand.

" Smell my flower," he said.

Astounded, I looked at Ingles for one fleeting moment, but on his face there was only blank amazement at this strange request. I felt nothing but acute distaste at the thought of inhaling the perfume of that abominable flower with which those long, delicate fingers had never ceased to toy. And yet something, an irresistible hint of command in his voice, forced me to obey. I was to thank God many times in after years that my will had proved the lesser.

Even as I leant forward, my nose in close proximity with that sweet-smelling carnation, even as our heads came close together, which by the very action he had demanded they were bound to do, I heard quite softly, so low

that only I could hear, one word, one solitary word :

" Listen ! " said the little man's voice.

I listened, and there came to me perfectly distinctly part of a conversation. I could hear a woman's voice saying :

" It's in the fifth from the clasp."

And a man's voice answered, deep satisfaction very evident in his tone :

" Thank God ! "

The little man sat back again and smiled to me. Completely bewildered I stared back, then, evidently taking pity on my amazement, he grinned.

I use those two words advisedly. Always before his smile had been affected, had been strangely forced, but this time it was definitely a grin, something which I understood, something which I had seen on the faces of my friends out hunting or after a hard rally on a squash court.

" A little invention of mine," he said quietly. " Five tables away from us on the left there are two people in whom I am interested. As a matter of fact I am completing the case to-night. It was necessary for me to listen to their conversation. A little arrangement with the authorities here, and my little microphone, concealed by this flower, tells me all that I want to know. That was

why I was unable entirely to arise when you came to my table. Please forgive me." He smiled happily. " She is wearing what, I believe, is called a choker necklace—false pearls, rather large. In the fifth pearl from the clasp is what I am looking for—that is all that I wanted to know ; that, and the fact that she has on her the proof which will put her away for several years."

He rose to his feet and immediately left us. He moved straight through the door of the ball-room, the *maître d'hôtel* close at his heels. He had disappeared only for a second, when we saw the *maître d'hôtel* returning to the room and approaching the table where were seated the couple to whom I had been listening. He was polite but firm ; a *maître d'hôtel* who knew his business. There was a certain expostulation, the hint of a scene. But this was quickly over. The couple—the girl now looking positively alarmed—rose to their feet and left the room. And as we watched them pass out of the restaurant, so did two men, dreadfully clearly stamped as police officials in plain clothes, close in around them. They were whisked away without a soul in the room knowing, or even suspecting, that this incident, certainly thrilling and possibly tragic to the actors therein, had occurred.

Almost at once he came back to us. He sat

down. He was perfectly happy, perfectly at ease ; he seemed to have forgotten all about them. He turned to me.

" What is your trouble ? " he said.

In that moment, perhaps, I had my first insight into the fact that the little man was tireless. He had only just completed one job of work and here he was starting out, within sixty seconds, on another.

For a few moments I hesitated. Although I had been waiting for this moment, although I had been collecting my thoughts in order to tell in as few words as possible the whole story, this sudden and abrupt arrival of the zero hour rather took away my breath and scattered my ideas.

It was in that moment that I lost my chance.

Looking back on it now, I realise that we seemed horribly unaware of the drooping touch of destiny which hovered over our shoulders. The air all around us was full of mischief, charged with danger. I feel that had we known anything at all of the events of the future our gestures would have been furtive and our words spoken softly into each other's ears.

I was about to start to tell my tale when the interruption occurred.

"MR. DERMOTT, sir?"

I looked up quickly. A waiter stood by my side.

"You're wanted on the phone; this way, sir."

Before I had time to realise what I was about, almost automatically I had risen to my feet, murmured apologies and hastened from the room.

It was no unusual thing for me to be thus summoned to the phone; I was a frequent visitor to this club and had many times left instructions at my home that should I be needed they could obtain me here. But, as I walked swiftly in the wake of the fast-departing waiter, the strangeness of this particular call struck me with a curious fear. For tonight I had most certainly left no such instructions. Who then could it be? I had arrived at the telephone-booth and entering it quickly I placed the receiver to my ear.

And then I received a thrill, a thrill of such vivid pleasure that all else was for the moment forgotten. For the voice that spoke into my ear was low and sweet, a voice that I had feared never to hear again.

"Janice!" I shouted her name triumphantly.

" Yes," her voice came softly to me over the wire, " yes, Trevor, it's me . . . and, oh, my dear, I want to see you so desperately . . . I've got something of the greatest importance to tell you . . . *good* news, darling. Are you free ? Can you come along now ? "

Could I go to heaven ?

" What's your address, darling ? " I asked immediately. " I'll be along as fast as wheels can turn."

" Seventeen, Michel Road, Shoreditch . . . the first floor. Come alone, dearest, and don't mention the address to anyone . . . that's *most* important. I'll explain everything when we meet. Good-bye—and don't be long."

I heard the receiver click as it was put back on the hook.

I was out of that telephone-box in less than half a second. A waiter stood hovering in my way and without stopping for a moment I shouted to him as I passed to tell Mr. Ingles and his friend that I had to go away on very urgent business. Then, darting down the stairs, I hailed a taxi, gave the man the address and sank back on to the cushions.

Then, and then only, did it occur to me that the district in which Janice was living seemed hardly suitable for so fair a lady. Shoreditch ? Well, she would explain it all to me when we met, and, lighting a cigarette, I passed

the next twenty minutes very pleasantly indeed, thinking with joy about our coming meeting and pondering the mystery that lay behind her words.

The hands of my watch were fixed at a minute or two to one when at last the taxi stopped at a tall-storied house set in a gloomy street of similar buildings. The appearance of the place made me shiver involuntarily, and for the first time I wondered whether perhaps I should have brought Ingles and his extraordinary friend along. But Janice had particularly stressed the need for secrecy, and her word was law. Nevertheless, it was with an unaccountable sinking of the heart that I dismissed the taxi and mounted the dirty-looking steps to the front door. I raised my hand to the knocker, but before I had even time in which to lift it, the door was flung open and an old woman of villainous aspect stood before me.

"Mr. Dermott?" She wheezed the name between her toothless gums. "Oh, yes, you're expected, sir. This way to Miss Gordon's room."

I followed her into the house, but it was not without a certain instinctive chill that I heard the door clang to behind me. She pointed towards some incredibly dirty stairs, innocent of any covering, and began to mount them

slowly. With my mind now a prey to the gravest misgivings I followed close upon her heels. Janice in a place like this ? The thing was barely feasible ; yet I would stake my life on the fact—I, indeed, *was* staking it—that it had been the voice of Janice herself that had spoken to me on the phone.

We had arrived at the top of the staircase, and, moving to a room on the right—in which I could see that a light was burning—the old woman knocked briskly on the door, and then, without waiting for any reply, she thrust it open and stood aside for me to enter. For a second or two I hesitated, then walked quickly in and stared about me.

The room was empty. Even as I realised the fact I heard the door slam to behind me and a laugh, villainous and evil, cackled in my ears.

I had been trapped.

I darted to the door and shook it angrily, but my efforts were merely childish ; turning to the windows I pulled up the heavy blinds drawn over them and saw, with horror, that flight that way was quite impossible—thick iron bars were fixed across them. Furious with myself for the ease with which I had been caught I stormed about the room, tugging fruitlessly at the bars on the windows, banging with all my weight upon the door.

And then a frightful thought brought me to a sudden stop. I stood motionless, staring before me. Was it . . . could it be possible that Janice herself had conspired to bring me to my doom ? It had been her voice that had spoken on the phone. I could swear to hers among a thousand others. And yet . . . But with a quick return to sanity I thrust the thought away. Her voice, perhaps, but the trap, I felt convinced, was none of her making.

A sudden noise on the stairs startled me into a keen alertness. Creeping to the side of the door I crouched back against the wall, hoping that when it opened I might yet manage to escape, slip past my captors as they entered within the room—the old woman, I felt, would prove an easy prey. I could hear voices speaking, and gradually I could catch the words themselves.

" You're very early." It was the old hag speaking. " I didn't expect you yet by a long way."

And then another voice, a voice that was strangely familiar in my ears, answered her curtly :

" There's no such word as early in our trade . . . we're on time, that's all."

They were outside the door now and I could hear a key being fitted in the lock. I waited motionless, all my nerves keyed to fever pitch.

Flattening myself farther against the wall I prepared to spring out should occasion offer. The key turned suddenly, and with a noisy clatter the door was thrust open and a man entered. I waited not one instant. With a light step I slipped out of the room. . . and straight into the arms of another man crouching on the stairway. Even in that moment of excitement I noticed that both men were masked, but I was able to observe very little more, for the arms of the second man were tight about me and at his cry the first had come running to his aid. . . . I felt his fist crash down upon my head.

A black mist danced grotesquely before my eyes and with a stifled moan I slipped to the floor. . . .

. . . . .

When I came to my senses once more I was lying upon the upholstered cushions of a car whose speedy motion jolted my aching head about unmercifully. As I opened my eyes I must have moaned, for an anxious face was bent over me and I heard a voice, the voice of my old friend Robert Ingles, speak gently in my ear.

"How are you feeling now, Trevor, old chap? Here, take a drop of this."

"This" proved to be a flask of brandy which

he was holding to my mouth. I took a deep draught and felt immeasurably better, but I was still very dazed, not only from the sudden blow but also from the strangeness of events. Where was I now? What in the world was Ingles doing here?

"But . . . but what . . . ?" I managed to stammer.

Immense surprise was binding my tongue however; I could say no more, but staring before me at the seat of the driver I saw the face of Ingles' friend, "the only man in London who can be of help," smiling around at me.

"Feeling better?" he asked cheerfully. "Awfully sorry about that blow, but I couldn't risk things."

He turned back again to the wheel, leaving me to ponder this over. But my head was aching too painfully to make thought possible. Turning again to Ingles I burst out eagerly:

"How did *you* get here? And what . . . ?"

But I stopped immediately, for lying before me upon the floor were two black masks which tumbled lightly about the car as it was jolted along. A sudden comprehension flooded my mind: I turned once more to Ingles, who was seated beside me.

"It was you?" I asked breathlessly. "You pretended . . ."

"To be the men sent to fetch you," broke in

Ingles quickly. "Quite right, Trevor; but don't thank me for it though, it was entirely Julian's idea."

He glanced towards his friend admiringly.

"How on earth did you know where to find me?" I asked, after a moment.

Ingles laid a restraining hand upon my arm.

"Now just be quiet for a little while, and don't speak. It's bound to be bad for your head . . . it must be aching terribly."

It was, but so was my mind; aching to know what exactly had occurred.

"But . . ." I burst out irritably.

And again Ingles stopped me.

"Now just lie back there and listen and I'll explain everything. For heaven's sake don't be so impatient. We've got the rest of the evening."

He had no idea, when he spoke those last words, how entirely unprophetic they would soon prove to be, and neither had I; so leaning back obediently upon the cushioned seat, I waited with all the patience that I could muster.

"Well," said Ingles slowly, "as soon as you went rushing off to answer that phone call, Julian turned to me and asked whether your trouble was serious. I told him that it was, and he got up immediately, muttering something about being near the telephone-booth in

case you wanted us. I couldn't quite see the necessity myself. Anyway, we got to the booth just after you'd left it, so the waiter told us your message on the spot. Julian's face rather startled me. I knew something pretty awful was afoot. In a second we were outside that place, just in time to see your taxi whizz round the corner. Julian yelled to the commissionaire to know whether it was yours, then jumped into his car, which luckily was just outside by the kerb, and without waiting to see whether I followed he started it off. I can tell you, Trevor, I did those last five yards quicker than I've ever run since I won the hundred yards at school. . . . I didn't see myself being left out of things ! "

I was beginning to understand.

" So you followed me ? " I said slowly.

He nodded.

" That's it. We were close at your heels all the way."

" But I don't quite understand," I put in quickly. " How did he know it was all a trap. . . . He couldn't . . ."

" He *didn't* know," said Ingles grimly, " but he thought it looked jolly like one. You see, you were just about to tell him your story when the phone call came through. Julian is rather a well-known man, Trevor . . . in certain circles. . . . That's why I brought you

to him. What more likely than spotting you were in conference with him someone decided to cut it as short as possible . . . therefore the phone call. Anyhow, that's Julian's reasoning, and I think it's pretty sound."

" You mean we were followed then . . . all the time that we were searching for your friend. . . . By the way, Robert, what *is* his surname ? "

Ingles smiled

" Strange," he said slowly ; " rather an apt name for the old fellow, I think. . . . He's the strangest and most extraordinary man I've ever encountered. But about the shadowing . . . yes, I should think you've been treated to a fairly strict supervision all day long, old chap. What a frightful chase we must have given them . . . searching like that for Julian." He laughed with a wicked appreciation.

" But why didn't Strange stop me, then, before I went into the house ? It would have been very much safer."

Ingles nodded his head.

" Yes, that's what I wanted him to do, but, you see, it was only a surmise on his part that the thing was a trap, and he couldn't butt in very well unless you really were in danger."

" Then how did he know I was ? "

" My dear fellow." Ingles laughed. " I

hope it's not a habit of yours to pull up people's blinds and tug furiously at their window-bars . . . We were watching in a house opposite. . . . Julian produced the masks and we did a spot of bluffing . . . with eminently satisfactory results ! "

" Oh, *eminently* ! " I murmured ironically, rubbing my head in protest.

" Oh, that ! " Ingles laughed again, somewhat unsympathetically I thought. " Well, you see, we didn't know how many people might be in that house, and we were afraid you might recognise us and spoil the show."

" I see." I turned to him seriously. " You know, Ingles, I didn't think, when I came to you this afternoon, that before the day was out I'd have to be thanking you for . . ."

" Well, you needn't do it," said Ingles briskly. " Reserve all your pretty speeches for Julian. . . . He's the man who deserves 'em. Here we are at your flat, so you'll be able to prattle them off. . . . I told Julian to drop us here."

The car had stopped before the block of flats on the ground floor of which lay my own. In a surprisingly short space of time we were within my cosy sitting-room, in process of dismissing drinks. A cheery fire was burning (my housekeeper always banked it well with coal before she left at night), and stretched out

comfortably in a long easy-chair, Ingles on one side of me, Strange on the other, I started to tell my tale.

First of all I had to explain the nature of the phone message that had sent me dashing off so gaily to my fate. This was a singularly unpleasant task; for strive though I might to make it appear that Janice was not involved, yet appearances were entirely damning, for the voice—I knew well enough—had been hers alone. Rather to my surprise, however, Strange treated this fact lightly enough; although I had not as yet commenced on my story he could see that the possibility of Janice's treachery had hit me hard.

"There are a thousand and one ways of simulating a voice," he said quietly, in those calm, even tones which so invited confidence. "Don't let that bother you too much, Dermott, for the moment at least."

I smiled wryly to myself: a thousand and one ways, possibly, for any other voice, but I knew, with an unshakable confidence, that there had been no question of simulation about the voice I heard. However, I was glad enough that he should think this, and without further ado I commenced upon my story.

"I'll tell you everything from the beginning," I said, "just as I told it to Ingles."

Strange nodded his head; his eyes were

fixed on me unswervingly ; there was a steadiness in his regard which I found embarrassing. I turned my face towards the fire and proceeded with my tale in the relation of which I had been so grimly interrupted less than an hour before.

I had arrived at the point of my adventure when that phone call, brimful of menace, had shattered my hopes, when a sudden rap on the front door stemmed my words. The hour was late for a caller, and with a return of excitement we sat motionless for an instant, staring at each other with questioning eyes. Then with one accord, we jumped to our feet.

My flat consisted of four rooms—sitting-room, bedroom, bathroom and kitchen—leading off a tiny private hall. It was into this last that we rushed up to the door on which had come that sudden rap. The electric light was burning and I could see that in the little basket attached to the letter-box there lay an envelope. Trembling with a nervous excitement I drew it out ; it was addressed to me in a long, straggling hand—a hand I did not know.

Thrusting this into my pocket I turned to the door and pulled it open. Even as I did so, even as I moved forward towards the steps, I heard a muttered curse behind me, and Strange leaped forward, dragging me back into the

hall. Not a moment too soon, however, for just as I was jerked from the opening a bullet whizzed past me within an inch or so of my head.

"You're the most harebrained idiot I've ever come across."

Strange's voice, curiously unmoved, muttered in my ear.

For a second there was silence while we waited, listening intently for approaching or retreating steps. . . . There was none, but suddenly the unmistakable sound of a starting car shattered the tension.

"Come on!" cried Strange, and before I had guessed his purpose he was speeding through the doorway and down the communal hall leading to the great front door. Ingles and I rushed after him, banging the door of my flat to behind us, and darted swiftly to the street. Even as we reached it I saw a car vanishing round the corner, and a second or so later had leaped into Strange's Bentley and the three of us were off in quick pursuit.

It had all happened in so short a space of time, with such stunning suddenness, that for a moment I wondered whether indeed I must be dreaming the whole affair. For a moment only, however, for Adventure and I had been on far more than nodding acquaintance of late. I was beginning to believe, in fact, that we

were becoming a trifle too intimate. The splutter of that bullet as it hit the wall, the narrow margin of its misdirection, had jogged my nerves more than I cared to admit.

" Cigarette ? "

The offer came from Strange, and I saw that one hand only was resting on the driving-wheel ; with the other he was proffering his case. I took one gratefully.

" Thanks," I said, and as I did so I wondered what sudden vision he must have had as to the tottering state in which my nerves now stood.

I searched my pockets for a match, and immediately my fingers came in contact with an envelope . . . the letter from the box ! I had forgotten this, incredible though it seems, and slitting the envelope with shaking fingers I read the contents aloud, raising my voice so that Strange also might hear :

" You have been warned once and you took no notice ; this is my second and final warning. Don't meddle in this matter any further or you will blame your parents for the fact that you were born. Life can be more than a mere burden."

There was no signature. I stared at it in silence ; the message was ambiguous enough

to safeguard its sender, yet, without an instant's doubt, I knew exactly—or thought I knew then—the nature of the threat that lay so dreadfully between its lines. The house with the shuttered windows! In my inmost mind I had more than a vague idea as to the deadly trade that went on therein . . . an idea which as yet I had not dared to mention even to Ingles. A chill crept over me, a chill for which the cool night breeze was in no way responsible. A voice speaking in tones which were amazingly calm and unperturbed jolted me out of my unwholesome thoughts.

" Quite a literary fellow—though a trifle too melodramatic for good taste! "

Strange laughed as he spoke, and on the instant my moment of panic was over; there was an irresistible reassurance about this man which left no room for fear.

We were racing now down a long wide road, keeping a sufficient distance to avoid discovery from that tiny red sports car which was our quarry. It was not far from two, and very little traffic obstructed our progress, which was just as well, for the car we were following was eating up the miles with incredible speed; it was all that we could do to keep it in sight. Happily, the night, favoured by the moon, was light enough, myriads of stars twinkling in the sky, and there was small danger of our losing

sight, for one moment, of the car that raced ahead. It was carrying lights, but Strange took the risk of turning his off. He might be stopped, but our pursuit would not be noticed.

There is an extraordinary exhilaration about driving in a car at night, a thing in which I have always delighted, but never before did I feel this so keenly as in that mad midnight chase along the emptying streets in pursuit of danger. For that it was danger, and danger of the gravest and most hazardous kind, which we were bound for I did not for an instant question . . . nor, I felt assured, did either of my friends. Danger in front of us, the night wind overhead and the mad thrill of hunting all combined to render that journey the most memorable and joyous of my life.

For two hours we followed in a cautious pursuit, without for a moment raising, I felt assured, the smallest suspicion on the part of the man whom we were dogging. The curious admiration which I had felt for Julian Strange ever since first I had heard him speak was increased a thousandfold in my mind by the dexterous way in which he handled that car. In and out of by-ways we rushed, emerging only when the tiny sports car was on the distant horizon, then dashing madly on in a record-breaking spurt ; thus it was that we

were able both to avoid detection and to remain within sight of that twinkling red tail-light. For two hours we continued the pursuit, but two hours only according to clock-time, for, in the nervous tension of my mind, half an hour became decreased into a mere ten minutes ; and it was with a gasp of surprise that after a journey which to me had appeared to last less than an hour I realised my watch was on the stroke of four.

We were in the heart of the country now, racing along a winding lane whose devious and sudden turns made of our following a difficult task. Julian Strange slackened down to allow an even greater interval to lie between . . . and it was just as well. For the very next bend showed us a long, narrow road stretching far into the distance ahead . . . and along that road no little red sports car was swiftly fleeing.

The realisation forced Strange into an instant stop. In a second he had swung the car back around the bend once more and shut off the engine. Then, jumping lightly from his seat, he turned to me.

" Well," he said—and even in that moment I found time to marvel at the entire calm and coolness of his voice—" I rather think that we've arrived. Come along. . . . This is where the fun begins . . . I hope ! "

Ingles and I were out of the car and by his side even as he spoke the words, and with a sensation of utter unreality clouding my mind I began to move softly around the bend and down the lane that lay beyond it.

We made a curious trio in that wooded country-side : all three without hats or coats, Ingles and myself attired, it is true, in ordinary lounge suits ; but Julian Strange, in his admirably-cut dinner-jacket with its resplendent button-hole was singularly out of keeping. I glanced at my companions, and for the first time a sense of the utter futility of our coming depressed my soul. What was the use, I wondered, of this nocturnal chase, this reckless dash into something for which none of us appeared prepared, something which promised danger—a danger so unknown as to be doubly perilous. For a moment my heart sank profoundly, and I was about to utter aloud the deep doubts that filled my mind when the voice of Strange, that confident, reassuring voice, shamed me into silence.

" Look out for a clearing in the trees," he murmured, and pointed towards the fir-trees which on either side hemmed the road, stretching unbrokenly, it seemed, into the distance. " On the left . . . I'll watch the right."

" A clearing in the trees ? " I repeated his words in perplexity. " What on earth's the

use of that? What we want to find is the drive up which it's gone."

Julian Strange laughed.

"If these people are as clever as I'm beginning to suspect," he answered quickly, "there'll be no drive to see. Only . . . they're not likely to have them all the way along . . . so look out for a clearing in the trees."

"Not likely to have them all the way along" . . . the words he had spoken echoed again in the ears of my mind, like some meaningless puzzle in a fairy-story, so meaningless that I felt, indeed, no desire for explanation. Doggedly, with no clear reason for what I was doing, I walked down the road, turning my eyes towards the right, staring into the deepness of the trees to sight a clearing. But there was none. The night was very light, and I could see the unbroken line of fir-trees standing back, trunk after trunk, into the thickness of the wood.

A sudden cry from Ingles jolted my attention. I turned at once and saw him pointing with trembling hand to the trees upon his left. He was slightly in advance of Julian Strange, who had darted quickly to his side.

"Look!" he cried. "Behind those few trees you can see they're infinitely sparser."

It was quite true: although the shrubs and bushes which bordered the lane were in no wise

fewer, beyond a definite gap seemed to part the fir-trees.

Strange smiled suddenly, a smile in which there was a gleam of triumph, and I knew at once that he had found what he sought.

"I wonder how it works," he said, and bending over the bushes he began pulling them gingerly apart in an eager search, but, to my immense surprise, he made no attempt to force his passage.

For a second or two I watched him curiously, but then the whole affair struck me as entirely stupid, an utter waste of precious time, and I told him so sharply.

"What's all the mystery about, Mr. Strange?" I asked, and I fear my voice was impatient. "If you want to get through those bushes why don't you pull them aside . . . ?"

He turned to me; he was frowning slightly and in his hand he held a twig of laurel. He handed this to me.

"Too clumsy," he said slowly, "much too clumsy a method of approach. . . . Also . . . you never know, it might be dangerous. Look at that," he pointed to the twig which, in entire mystification, I was holding in my hand. "What d'you think that is?"

"A laurel twig, of course," I said impatiently. "Really, Mr. Strange, if we've come

here just to improve our knowledge of nature . . ."

" It's sometimes a very useful thing to do," broke in Strange, quite unperturbed. " It teaches one, anyhow, that purple berries do not usually adorn a laurel-bush in the early spring."

I stared at him—I was still far from comprehending what lay unspoken in his mind—then I looked once more at the twig within my hand. I now noticed what had escaped my eyes before : attached to the stalk and lying almost beneath the leaf was a tiny bunch of purple berries. Yet, even now, the fact had no significance. I turned to Strange again.

" What do you mean ? " I asked.

But Ingles broke in eagerly. He had got nearer than I to the riddle of the berries.

" Is the bush a fake ? " he asked.

Strange smiled.

" No, not exactly that," he said ; " it's the real thing, all right, but somewhat doctored. It's been treated to a process of glazing . . . of life-preservation . . . all these bushes have, in fact. You don't notice it until you examine them closely."

He pointed towards the shrubs, and going nearer I saw, with a growing excitement, that what he had said was indeed true. There was a certain stiffness about each bush which was not natural. I turned to Strange in wonder.

"What on earth . . . ?" I began; but I broke off at once, for Strange was striding with eager steps across the road towards some object which in that shadowy light I could not quite discern.

Then, even as I saw him bend over it, even as those long, tapering fingers touched it deftly, something happened to distract my gaze. For, with a sudden sharp click as of a door being thrust ajar the entire hedge containing those shrubs so strangely stiffened moved back . . . back . . . into the woods beyond, leaving a wide stretch of road big enough for any car to travel, a road which led, as far as my startled eyes could see, into the distance where it merged into shadows.

My sudden exclamation brought Strange and Ingles to my side. For a long moment Strange stared at the opening in the hedge of shrubs and his smile was grim.

"Quite ingenious," he muttered, and approaching that part of the hedge which had moved back so deftly, he examined it with care. Seized with a deep excitement, I hastened to inspect this also, and to my astonishment I saw that for a distance of about twelve feet or so the shrubs were fixed to a kind of soil-covered boarding; the soil being, perhaps, not deep enough to provide sufficient nourishment to maintain their life, the shrubs had been

treated to a special process whereby they were immune from any prospect of decay. No better mode of guarding an estate could well have been devised, and with a sudden leap of the heart I realised exactly what this meant. That which was carried on within the house inside this wood must be of a nature surely as infamous, as terrible as anything I had dared to fancy, else such precautions as these to ensure its privacy would never have been required; and with a mounting pulse I turned to my companions.

Strange was now bending over that object on which his fingers had been moving when my attention had been startled away. Ingles was by his side, and in a moment I had joined them.

That which they were examining with so great an interest was a milestone, grey and covered with moss, but I could see that this was no ordinary stone to count the miles, for instead of being parallel with the bordering of the road it stood out at right angles. My comprehension was becoming quickly more acute, for without the need of any explanation I realised at once its essential purpose.

I stared at it with awe.

But, even as I did so, a hand touched my shoulder.

"Come on," said Strange softly: the

lightness had fled from his voice; it was now unusually tense.

He had turned towards the opening, and with bated breath I followed him, Ingles close upon my heels, and together we walked softly along that broad, white road. When we had moved a very few yards, however, Strange, whose eyes had been flitting eagerly around, suddenly stopped. He was examining the straight, long branch of a fir-tree which stuck out across our path almost at right angles to the other boughs of the tree. Again that momentary smile of triumph parted his lips. Seizing the branch in his hands, he pulled it to him with a sudden movement. On the instant I heard another click, a click which sounded like that of a pistol-shot in the silence of the wood; for a second my heart seemed to stand still. I turned around and stared at the country path from which we had come. And even as I did so a mass of shrubs and bushes barred my vision: the strangely devised gate was once more in its place.

"I only hope to goodness there isn't some sort of warning signal showing that it's been opened," muttered Strange.

And he did not hope so more fervently than I. I, perhaps more than any of us, sensed what depths of villainy we were about to encounter, for, after all, no one but I had heard

those shrieks which had sounded so terribly within my ears when I had stood within that padded room not so very long ago.

In a silence which was dictated by no mere sudden prudence we moved swiftly down the road, which ran along for a distance of perhaps a hundred yards or so, merging eventually into that gravel drive encompassing the house. We were yet a yard or so away from this point, however, when Strange motioned to us both to follow him. He was moving now with an increasing caution, and stepping from the road he began to force a passage noiselessly between the trees. Ingles and I followed close upon his heels, until, with a sudden jerk at the heart, I realised that we were standing on the very edge of that clearing in which was set the house.

With one accord we remained stock-still peering out from between the trees ; the house with its myriads of tiny steel shutters was once more before me. Even though the sight this time was expected, even though I had warned my companions what this building was like, the sudden vision of it there before us acted strangely upon all three. I could see Ingles' face grow curiously taut, and by the sudden tightening of his mobile mouth I knew that upon Strange also the house did not fail in effect. For myself, a momentary trembling in

every limb, which I hoped fervently was imperceptible, proved that my nerves had not emerged unscathed from the ordeal of that evening. It was in a silence which none of us cared to break that for a long moment we stared before us.

We had approached the house from the front, but I could see before that massive iron-studded door no car to indicate that our quarry had arrived. The garage, as I well knew, lay on the left side of the building, and it was more than probable that the car had already been placed inside.

Again my glance swept round the house, and as I gazed at it my heart was heavy, for what on earth could we do now that we had arrived? How could we, from this blank mask of shuttered windows, tear out its secret? And if we did not . . . what of Janice? Was she there, her very youth doomed to canker within the shadows of that grim pile?

My heart was sick within me, and something of these thoughts must have become translated into my face, for I felt a hand touch lightly on my arm, and, turning quickly, I looked into the dynamic eyes of Julian Strange.

"Don't look so blue," he whispered softly; "this is only a tour of inspection, you know; my plans are not yet made."

And, indeed, how could they have been, for

it was only within the last hour or two that the exact facts of my dilemma had been placed before him. Yet, in some curious fashion, the words themselves comforted me, coming as they had from the lips of this extraordinary man of whose undoubted powers Ingles had so strongly vaunted.

"This way," he whispered.

And again Ingles and I followed him; but this time we circled the house, walking noiselessly well within the trees, and all the time I could see the eyes of Julian Strange narrow keenly as he explored, with a thoroughness of which the intensity of his gaze was sufficient proof, every nook and cranny of the building's strangeness. At last we had made a thorough tour of the place, during which I had pointed out to Strange the gates that hid the garage; we were once more at the point where we had started, or, rather, almost at the point, for this time we stood on the other side of the road, not daring, had we so wished, to cross its dangerous width.

"And what now?" I looked at my companions quickly, but there was a blankness in the face of Ingles that promised nothing; while, as he caught my gaze upon him, Julian Strange shook his head and smiled.

"We can't do anything for the moment," he whispered, and his tone was full of regret.

" Just stay here and watch . . . something may happen that . . ."

But he broke off in mid-sentence and clutched my arm.

" Something is happening now," he said. " Look ! "

I followed his pointing finger, and a wave of excitement swept over me. A number of square-shaped chimneys ran along the top of the house, chimneys unusually large for any dwelling, more like those which destroy the beauty of a factory town. On one of these our eyes had become riveted, for in the shadowy light a figure could be seen hoisting itself laboriously out of the chimney to the roof below. The light was too bad, however, for us to discern much more, and we watched, in a growing excitement, as the figure moved slowly along the roof until, reaching the very edge, it stood there motionless, staring down at the frightful drop that must be made to reach the ground. No pipes, no window-sills afforded any means by which escape might be effected ; I say " escape " because there was about the movements of this figure a certain furtiveness which left small room for doubt that such was indeed its purpose.

And then a terrible thought came into my mind. Might it not be Janice herself who, sick with fear, had taken the only means by

which to gain her freedom ? For somewhere firmly rooted in my brain was the persistent conviction that Janice was now a prisoner, captive of her father, and that one glimpse that I had caught of him made the very thought of such captivity a living torture.

I turned to Strange and Ingles.

" Quick ! We must *do* something," I said, and my voice sounded strangely in my ears. " It . . . it may be Janice ! "

But Strange shook his head. His eyes, bright and eager, were fixed intently on that motionless figure upon the roof.

" No . . . it's not a woman," he said, slowly. " I feel sure of that ; but we're going to *do* something, all the same. A man who's escaping can be made to talk a lot ! "

The man was standing almost immediately above that short fourth wall corresponding to the one in which was fixed the garage. There was no shutter in this wall, no apparent means whereby our movements might be spied, and with a word to us to remain where we were Strange moved noiselessly out into the open and up to it. Slipping something from his pocket he stood back a step, measured the wall as though to take his aim, then, with a sudden deft movement he threw up his right hand . . . something hit the top of the wall, and a thin rope dangled precariously from the

opening of the parapet, dangled within a few feet of where the man was standing.

My eyes had been fixed upon Strange, but now I turned to the man again, and I saw that this sudden apparent intervention of Providence on his behalf had startled him acutely—startled him, in all probability, far more than would have done a corresponding handicap. But he had moved towards the rope and was examining it dubiously, suspicion written large in all his actions; then leaning over the small parapet that edged the roof, he stared at the man below him. Something about Strange's manner must have been reassuring: his back was turned to me and I could only see that he was signalling with upraised hands towards the chimney-stack and then to the rope. A second later and the man had decided to take the risk.

Swiftly, so swiftly that his movements seemed to be possible only through long practice, he tied the rope firmly to the chimney, slipped down it and stood staring up into the imperturbable face of Julian Strange.

For a few moments rescued and rescuer stared at each other. Then:

"Come!" said Strange, and with one hand laid gently on the arm of his companion he pushed him towards the trees where we were waiting.

As they came towards us I stared at the man,

stared with a sudden pity, for he was small, undersized, indeed obviously ill-fed and weak, but above all I could see he was afraid. Fear seemed to wrap him like a cloak, showed in the downward tilt of his rounded shoulders, in the listless walk, the furtive gait and gestures, but more than all else in his livid face and staring eyeballs. An abject fear, and it was only a small realisation of what the man must have gone through to produce so great a panic that saved me from a feeling of entire aversion.

Ingles and I watched his approach, watched the sly, sideways looks that he cast at Strange, looks in which a dawning hope was grappling with dull despair. In another moment they had reached us, and then, as his eyes fell upon us two waiting within the sheltering trees hope fled from them, and he waited listlessly for whatever might befall.

"Come on," said Strange again. "We'd better remove ourselves from here."

And at the words the man beside him seemed to jump to life. He looked up at Strange and his lips were trembling so violently that he could hardly speak.

"You . . . then you . . . you're *helping* me?"

His eyes, bloodshot and frightful, stared eagerly from a haggard face; the sight was so piteous that I opened my mouth to speak, to

settle his doubts once and for all, but Strange was before me.

"Well," he drawled slowly in his lightest accents, "it does rather look like it, doesn't it. . . . *God!* What's that?"

We had started to move backwards through the wood, but a sound shocked us into entire immobility. From the grim mansion of the shuttered windows there had come a shriek that was destined to haunt my dreams for many a weary night. It represented all the fear in the eyes of the man before us translated into sound. He, perhaps because inured to such grim horrors, was the first of us to recover.

"It's . . . it's only one of 'em," he muttered, and his voice was low and gruff.

He continued his loping run through the trees, the three of us following, and when we were some distance from the house we emerged on to the smoothness of the road and marched down it briskly. It was obvious that the man was dropping with fatigue; yet, in spite of this, fear lent him strength to maintain a reasonable speed. We had covered quite half the length of that drive when the loud jangling of a bell, strident and unmusical, suddenly filled the air. We glanced at each other questioningly, but there was no question on the face of the abject creature by our side.

"God! . . . *God*! . . ." His voice had become hysterical. "The *bell*! They've got me . . . they've found out I've escaped!"

So that was it! In spite of myself I felt a wave of dread creep over me as the monotonous tolling of that warning bell clanged through the air. Its incessant repetition dulled my mind: I could only stare at the man stupidly.

Not so, however, Julian Strange. We had all stopped, as of one accord, at the first strokes of the bell; but now, with a rapid glance behind him, Strange spurred us on to a greater effort.

"Run like hell for the car," he cried.

And like hell we ran! All need for noiselessness had now departed, so in a reckless dash we fled along the road.

I have only a very sketchy remembrance of that mad rush along the path, the air full of the clanging bell, a remembrance which includes a vague glimpse of men racing in our wake and the baying of an angry dog. As we reached the fir-tree with its outstanding branch, Strange pulled at it; the gate of shrubs swung open, we raced through and up the road to that bend round which our car was hidden.

We jumped in, pulling the gasping wreck that we had rescued in between us; then,

with a deafening roar, the car was started and we shot off headed in an opposite direction to that of the wooded house.

As we did so I heard a yell behind us, and turning round I saw that two men were running down the road, two men in whose hands were gleaming pistols. A great vicious-looking bloodhound loped between them, and even as I looked a bullet sped past my cheek, almost grazing the bone. I ducked my head, and when I looked round again, this time somewhat more gingerly, the two men had fallen far behind . . . but the great dog was still tearing along the road.

Strange, who was driving, cast one glance around, then slipping an automatic from his pocket he turned sideways, one hand still on the wheel, took aim for a scarcely appreciable second, pulled the trigger . . . and the great dog fell gasping in the dust. His movements had been so easy, so assured, that for a moment I did not realise the keenness of eye and immense command of his pistol that had gone to make that shot effective. For a moment only, however, and then I marvelled. There certainly was something in this man which separated him entirely from the ordinary run of human beings. I hugged the thought to my heart throughout that long ride back to town, for now indeed I was beginning to believe in

the specious promises which Ingles had made, that in Julian Strange was to be found the one man in London who could be of help.

It was already day, a cold, sleety morning, when at last we drew up outside my flat. We all three jumped from the car, leaving Strange to drive to my garage a minute or so away.

"I've had a special lock attached to it," said Strange, pointing to his car, "that's probably why it was left intact when our friends called on you last time; but I won't trust to that again . . ."

And in a flash he was round the corner heading for the garage. In a very little while he had rejoined us, and before the dying embers of my fire we set about restoring warmth into our chilled frames. The man we had brought with us seemed in a state of exhausted stupor; he stared listlessly from one to the other, cringing at any sudden sound, almost as though he had not yet at all appreciated the tremendous fact that he was free. Strong drink and warm food, however, soon restored him to humanity; the taut lines of his face relaxed and a look of rapturous gratitude replaced the horror in his eyes. He turned at last to Strange and spoke in a hoarse, uneven voice.

"Guv'nor," he muttered, "you . . . you've saved me from hell itself. . . . I can't thank

you enough. . . . I . . . I'd do anything . . . it's got to be stopped . . . it's got to be stopped, I tell you ! "

His voice had become hysterical, and patting him gently on the shoulder, Strange motioned to him to finish his glass. The man did so, and the strong liquor appearing to have calmed him for the moment, Strange went on slowly :

" You were trying to escape," he said. " We happened to be there and were able to help, that's right, isn't it ? "

" Yes, guv'nor, that's right, you saved my life. . . . You . . ."

Strange broke in curtly.

" No, it isn't quite right. You see, we didn't *happen* to be there . . . we were there on very serious business."

He paused a moment deep in thought, and then went on briskly :

" But never mind that now. I want you to tell us all about yourself. Why you were trying to escape . . . what that place is . . . who the others are who screamed . . . how you got in there, and . . . how long ago you were in prison ? "

At the last words the man stiffened and stared at Strange, aghast.

" How . . . how did you know that ? " he stammered at last.

Strange smiled. Ingles and I watched him curiously.

"I can always tell when a man's done time," he answered lightly. "An expression in the eyes . . . a certain blankness. . . . Yes, I should think you were there about three years."

"Two and a half," said the man grimly. "You're quite right, guv'nor. My time was up." He thought for a moment, and when he continued there was a strange wondering tone in his voice as though the realisation astonished him: "only a month ago . . . only a month."

"Ah!" Strange leant forward. "And since then . . . you've been in that place?"

The man nodded.

"Yes . . . they got me directly I left quod. Some man . . . some *devil*, posing as a missionary fellow, met me outside the prison . . . promised me a job . . ."

"And asked you first if you were quite friendless?" interrupted Strange.

The man looked at him quickly.

"Yes," he said, "that's right, guv'nor, he made a special point of that. . . . I fell into the trap like a two-year-old. He promised me a job as caretaker . . . two quid a week, he said, and all found. . . . I jumped at it . . . and . . . and got brought down to that . . . that *hell*."

"I see." Strange nodded his head thoughtfully. "And what did you have to do?"

"*Do?* . . . why make some infernal stuff that made your eyes water even through the masks they gave us . . . stuff that was death . . . living death . . . withers the flesh on your bones . . . burns out your eyes. . . . The sights I've seen there . . . men with fingers crumbling away to nothing . . . with no legs; men with"—he lowered his voice and shot the words out as though in agony (I could see that this thing, more than all else, appalled the man)—"with no *minds*."

He stopped and for a moment there was silence; the truth, although I had suspected it, shocked me to the heart. For a second I felt my knees trembling beneath me, for I had stood so near to sharing the same fate as these imprisoned men. Had it not been for that girl . . . and again the thought of Janice came to torture me. I turned to the man quickly.

"Do you know a girl . . . very beautiful . . . golden hair . . . Janice Gordon . . . Is she there?"

But he only shook his head dubiously.

"No, guv'nor, no . . . I don't know 'er. Anyway, she wouldn't be there . . . you needn't worry. . . . They couldn't use women for *that* work . . . wouldn't be worth their while."

"Tell us exactly what sort of work it is,"

urged Strange calmly, and only the gleam in his eye betrayed his inward excitement.

Then, in a halting voice, his face quivering at the thought of the horrors through which he had passed, the little man explained the process by which a hundred or so human beings slaved day and night—literally day and night, for each man had a spell of certain hours—to make some substance of whose nature he could tell us little, save that it was yellow, smelt of peppermint and ate gradually into the skin and bone, destroying both. What the stuff was used for he could not say, but he was convinced that it was made eventually into some marketable product and borne away on vans ; for many a night he had heard the rumbling of a heavy lorry going slowly down the drive ; had heard it return in the early dawn, to vanish, probably, once more within that skillfully-hidden garage which I had seen.

Strange sat humped up in a chair, his head between his hands, staring with rapt interest at the little man from whose lips had come this incredible story. Suddenly he spoke, and his voice was moved out of its ordinary calm.

"A factory with forced labour. . . Gad! . . . what an idea . . . and probably the shops are full of it . . . full of some product for which these poor devils are sweating away their lives . . ."

" And *minds* ! " broke in the other quickly.

Strange stood up and looked at him thoughtfully.

" You mean . . . that shriek ? " he said in a low voice.

The man nodded, but he did not speak.

For a moment or two we were all silent : Strange pacing too and fro across the room, Ingles and I staring with amazed, incredulous eyes at the man before us ; the man himself turning every now and again to cast a fleeting glance at Strange

" What happens," he said suddenly, " when they start . . . to shriek ? "

" They just . . . disappear ! "

Again he glanced towards Strange ; but even as I watched him turn his head I saw his eyes dilate and a look of utter horror cross his face. He stared towards the door, stared as though unable to believe his eyes . . . but not for long : abruptly he yelled, and his scream brought us all to a quick attention.

" The powder ! " he cried. " Oh, my God . . . it's the powder . . ."

I glanced in the direction of his gaze, and then jumped to my feet. For pouring in at the door, filling the room with a curious, not unpleasant peppermint smell, was a mass of yellow powder, a powder from which some gas seemed to diffuse, for the room was quickly

becoming filled with yellow vapour which hung limply in the air like smoke.

I was staring at it helplessly when a hand clutched my shoulder. Strange pulled me towards the window and started to pull it open quickly.

"Jump out. . . . try to get to the roof," he said, "it's our only chance."

He pushed me before him and I was clambering out when the thought of the others halted me.

"But what about. . . . ?"

"They're here . . . you're holding them up. . . . Quick ! . . . there's someone at the door."

And I could hear heavy blows being struck against the panels of my outer door.

Although set on the ground floor, my flat was so situated that it was impossible to reach the ground, a deep basement, too wide to jump, separating it from the road. Our only means of escape lay by the roof, two stories up ; and by making use of a convenient water-pipe upon my right I scaled along it and without too great a strain upon my muscles managed to attain the roof. Strange was close behind me ; in a second he was by my side and we both crouched down, huddled together among the chimney-pots ; but, to my horror, no one else appeared.

"But Ingles . . ." I started, when Strange shook his head.

"I dragged them to the window," he said, "and stuck handkerchiefs over their noses. . . . I knew it was hopeless to try to get them here . . . the little man had fainted and Ingles was nearly as bad. Damnable having to leave them, but it would have been madness to stay . . . then we'd all have got taken."

Although the thought of Ingles lying helpless among such unholy devils made me long to rush recklessly to his aid, I forced the impulse aside, recognising its utter foolishness. As Strange had said, of what use would it be to any of us were we also to become their captives . . . better as it was. Yet the thought of Robert Ingles grieved my heart.

Suddenly the sound of a car starting up broke the silence. Raising my head an inch above the parapet that edged the roof I saw a car—a car whose outlines were only too familiar—setting off down the road. It was a four-seater saloon and that very same car in which I had been gassed. Were Ingles and that poor human derelict lying inside? The thought was torture to me, and I turned to Strange.

"Quick! . . . We must do something. . . . We can't stay hidden up here, while they . . ."

I rose to my feet, but Strange pulled me down again.

"Wait," he said. "Over-eagerness has ruined many a good campaign. We must give them five minutes to make sure they don't return."

The five minutes over we emerged at last from our hiding-place, walked to the rear of the building and clambered quickly down a fire-escape which was easy of access. Arrived on the ground, Strange started walking with rapid steps along the road, not pausing for a moment to cast a glance into that ground-floor room from which we had escaped.

"Hadn't we better make certain that they haven't left them there?" I suggested.

But Strange shook his head.

"We daren't go back into that room with all the gas about; besides, I saw them carried away," he said curtly.

I looked at him in astonishment.

"But . . . but you *couldn't* have!" I stammered. "You weren't looking . . . not until the car started."

A frown of impatience crossed his face.

"Of course not, but the back of my watch is fitted with a special mirror; held at certain angles it reflects what it is sometimes very convenient to be able to see . . . I was looking in it all the time."

And I remembered that during our vigil on the roof he had been toying with his watch,

turning and twisting it, rather nervously, I thought, for I little realised its vital purpose. I glanced at him with a new respect : this man was brimful of surprises.

We had arrived at the bend of the road and before us lay my garage. A few minutes later Strange, once more at the driving wheel of his car, I seated beside him, we were racing off towards that perilous house where, as we both surmised, the captives had been taken.

Although he had made the journey only once before, and that in circumstances which did not make for concentration, it was without the slightest trace of hesitancy that Strange handled the car, driving up side roads and around turnings with an assurance at which I could but marvel. There seemed to be nothing that this odd creature lacked in the necessities of his profession : great abilities, a cool nerve, vivid imagination, an excellent memory.

And also human understanding.

" Go to sleep," he said. " I'll want you fresh at the other end."

THE FORCING HOUSE CHAPTER VI

THE events I am about to relate, forming the culmination of the many hours of anxiety which had gone before and of

which the reader is now aware, are very vivid in my mind. They are vivid, perhaps, only because of the hectic sequence of events in which I was to play a small subsidiary part to the lead taken by Julian Strange. But I like to think, seated here in my study after an interval of some months, writing down all that happened, that it is all so vivid because of the happiness which was brought me, literally through the test of fire.

But I am digressing in my tale, and I hope that he or she who reads these words will forgive me for this one digression. Up to this point the events which happened, from that moment when I saw the road winding up the hill on that never-to-be-forgotten night which closed my walking tour, up to the moment when I fled in mortal terror from that house, I have told with no interpolated comment. I may be allowed here, perhaps, this little pause, which I have given myself in order to take breath before relating those events which made me so entirely breathless.

We arrived, in the early hours of the morning, in the vicinity of the sinister house. The sun was already shining brightly on the country-side when Julian Strange woke me from the troubled sleep into which I had fallen on that journey. But I had little time to notice these things, for the full realisation of

the position in which we were, of our responsibility to Robert Ingles and of my own longing once again to hold Janice in my arms, and this time really to have her future in my hands, came upon me in a flash. Even as I was conscious of the rays of the sun beating down upon me, so did my memory enable my brain to grasp the situation as I had left it when I had fallen into the merciful slumber which had given me rest during that motor-ride.

Strange's voice interrupted my thoughts.

" We've got to hide the car somewhere," he said. " The longer that the gentleman "—his mouth twisted into a smile, a cynical smile as he pronounced that word—" inside the house thinks either that he has frightened us away for good, or that we have failed to follow his raiders here, all the better."

I realised that he was right as usual ; but on looking round I found myself with little to suggest to help. I knew well enough that there was no house within miles of this one which was our objective.

" There's no garage anywhere near . . ." I started.

" A garage," said Strange, with a smile, " is entirely unnecessary ; in fact, human habitation is a danger." He paused for a moment. " We don't want anyone to see the car," he said, " nor to know of our presence."

I looked around and realised that the country was strange to me.

"How far are we from the house?" I asked.

"At the very most," said Strange, "two miles. We've got to be careful. That wood over there"—he pointed towards a turn in the road where a wood on the left-hand side could be seen to start and extend for a space limited only by our eyes and the bend of the road—"is, I think, the beginning of the wood in which the house is situated."

Suddenly an idea struck me.

"Why not use that wood?" I asked. "After all, they won't expect a stranger to use their own wood as a garage, and they are unlikely to patrol it so far from the house. If I remember rightly, that wood is pretty big, pretty densely supplied with undergrowth. We should be able to hide the car from any prying eyes, or innocent suspicion from passers-by."

"I was thinking of that," said Strange. "I am glad that you suggested it: it makes it unanimous. All right!"

Once again he let in the clutch, but I noticed that he started the car in top gear. We were on a slight downward slope, which made this possible, but that little action brought home the seriousness, the difficulty, the danger even of our mission. Strange was unwilling to

run any unnecessary risk. Obviously he had started the car in this manner purely and simply to make as little noise as possible, to attract as little attention as was compatible with the accomplishment of our aim.

As we came to the corner I saw that the road stretched straight until it breasted an upward slope, which I judged was probably the top of that hill—only the reverse side—at which I had looked with such dislike only a few weeks before. Evidently Strange had been right when he had suggested that this was the very wood in which the house was built. Stopping the car we both got out by common consent, and without saying a word we started to look around for some method of forcing it through the heavy undergrowth which would enable us to hide it successfully without fear of our transit being noticed by some innocent passer-by on the road. Strange himself advanced along the main portion of the road, while I, with a nod from him as he divined my intention, proceeded in the other direction, which took me down a sort of cart-track leading off the main road, and ending, presumably, at some farm-house.

I had not gone twenty yards before I came across the very spot for which we were looking; for here the undergrowth seemed to be broken as if by the sudden passage of some cart or

farm-wagon, and I had not gone ten yards down this very rough path before I noticed on my right a clearing. I investigated this and saw that it was a natural clearing of the undergrowth, not made by man but caused, perhaps, by the excessive foliage of the trees at this particular point, for probably this very thickness overhead prevented the sunlight from ever reaching the ground and thus stunted the growth of the bushes which were so profuse all around. It seemed quite possible to hide a car here and very easy to bring it to this spot.

I ran back, but even in that moment I was cautious, as cautious as Strange himself had been when he had started the car in top gear. I did not call to him, but seeing him some little way down the hill I ran towards him, and when I spoke, unconsciously I spoke in a whisper. I told him of what I had found, and with a murmured remark which I took to be congratulatory Strange turned on his tracks and backed the car carefully down the side road which I had indicated. We came to the cart-track and Strange examined it. Without a word he nodded ; evidently it would do.

Ten minutes later we emerged from the wood, the car carefully hidden and a modicum of happiness about us ; for the start of our adventure, at least, had been successful. We did not proceed down the road in the normal

manner, which, to reach the gate, would have taken us at the very outside, some twenty minutes. Instead we took over an hour for the journey, since we kept within the trees, within sight of the road, in order to keep our direction only, until suddenly we came upon the the drive which was so imperceptible from the road. Again keeping under cover of the trees, we advanced up this until we found ourselves in sight of the clearing in which the house was built. From that point we proceeded to the edge of the open space, to that line where the trees began to thin dangerously, worming our way on our stomachs, making as little noise as possible, taking every care to remain unnoticeable to any watcher from the windows of the house. And here we remained, staring at the grim barrack with its myriads of tiny shuttered windows, listening intently for the slightest sound. But there was none. As on that memorable evening when I had first seen it, the place appeared to be a dwelling of the dead ; a silence of utter desolation completely enwrapped it, and again, as on that previous night, I felt myself becoming unnerved by its chill inscrutability.

After a little while Julian Strange touched me on the arm and made me understand that I was to move back with him into the shelter of the trees. When we had retired some sixty or

seventy yards into the gradually thickening undergrowth, and not until then, Strange sat down and motioned to me to do likewise.

"We are all right here," he said quietly, "as long as we don't talk too loud."

I heaved a sigh of relief: I took from my pocket my cigarette-case and a cigarette from it; I put it to my mouth, was about to strike a match, when suddenly Strange knocked the Virginian from between my lips.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I didn't mean to be so rough nor so rude, but we must not smoke, even though we're unlikely to be seen. If anyone should pass, the smell of tobacco would give us away."

I felt ashamed—I blushed with shame, in fact, that I should have been guilty of so childish a mistake. Obviously my action had been highly dangerous, intensely stupid. I mumbled my apologies.

"Don't be silly," said Strange, with a smile. "After all, you are not accustomed to this sort of a situation—I am. It's up to me to prevent you from making a fool of yourself."

His smile took the sting out of his words.

"Listen," he said quietly. "I'm going round this house. I want to encircle it. You must stay here. I shall find you again in—shall we say an hour? Probably it will take me far less, but I daren't risk speed. If I'm

not back within the hour then go back to the car and wait for me. If I am not back by nightfall drive back to London and lay your story before the authorities."

"The authorities?" I asked.

"Yes—Scotland Yard. Here, take my card. This will make them believe you."

He scribbled something on the piece of pasteboard which he took from his pocket and gave it to me. Without looking at the words which he had written I put it in my pocket.

"Very well," I said.

"I don't expect anything to happen to me." He laughed. "So don't look so depressed. I shall be back within the hour all right, but I just want to look around. I don't think we can do anything before nightfall, which—" he paused—"well, which is a pity."

I knew exactly what he meant by that pause—I knew exactly how serious the situation was—but for the life of me I could not resist the question.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because," said Strange quietly, "Robert Ingles is in their hands, and every minute longer which he spends in their hands is . . ."

"Dangerous?" I said, as he paused again.

"Certainly dangerous and almost as certainly unpleasant."

With that the little man disappeared into

the wood, so suddenly that I almost cried to him to return to me. Had he gone so that I could see him go I would, perhaps, have felt less lonely, less abruptly lonely. But he seemed at one moment to be there and at the next to have vanished, and I felt that all the world had deserted me, that in this hour of need not only my own, but Janice's—not to mention Robert Ingles—I alone could help, and I was helpless. What was happening now within that shuttered house? Was Janice there, thinking, perhaps longing, for me? And Robert Ingles? Did he think we had deserted him, left him to suffer the tortures of the damned at the hands of that infamous man? What were they doing to him now? Had they . . . ? But the total futility of such thoughts, with their accompanying death to hope and confidence, was clear to my mind. In a desperate attempt to drive the misery from my soul I sought about for some diversion. And then I remembered that card which Strange had given me—that card which, should the worst arrive, I was to take with me to Scotland Yard. What had he written as an Open Sesame? Groping in my pocket I pulled it out and rapidly scanned the writing. In letters, the neatness of which made me gasp with surprise, for I had seen how swiftly they had been formed, Strange had written :

" Believe every word that Mr. Trevor Dermott tells you and come quickly."

I read it over twice, then slipping the pasteboard back into my pocket I stared before me thoughtfully. So that was how serious he considered the whole affair ? In some curious way that brief message on the card had presented to me the dangerous aspect of this mission on which we were engaged in a far deadlier light. Involuntarily I shivered.

That hour in which I spent my lonely vigil seemed to me more like a lifetime. But again, so abruptly that I was startled almost out of my wits, Julian Strange was by my side.

" Well ? " I said, as soon as I had recovered from my fright.

" Nothing," said Strange shortly. " The place might be a house of the dead. There's nothing doing at all. We will have to wait until nightfall.

Even as he spoke a sudden noise stiffened us both into entire immobility. From the drive near which we lay hidden there came the unmistakable rumbling made by lorries, heavy-laden . . . a sound which increased at every moment. Which way were they going ? Towards the house or away from it ? Scarcely daring to breathe, I listened intently as the sound rapidly increased. . . . They were

passing now . . . within a few yards of where we lay . . . then gradually the rumbling became less distinct, until at last it was a mere tremor in the distance.

I turned to Strange and was startled by the expression on his face. He was smiling now, but there was no mirth in his smile : triumph alone parted his lips. As I looked at him Strange stood up.

" Quick ! . . . Let's get back to the car," he said. " I've solved the problem."

Swiftly, with the speed, however, which was in no way divorced from a cautious noiselessness, we made our way back through the dense underbrush to that natural clearing in which the Bentley was hidden. Without a word we clambered inside, and then Strange turned to me quickly.

" Dermott, those were lorries," he said, " lorries going *from* the house laden with goods. They'll be returning some time . . . and that's our cue ! "

He smiled at me as though the whole affair was now explained, but I looked back at him blankly.

" But I don't understand . . ."

" I thought you'd grasp it," broke in Strange impatiently. " Don't you see that's our only way of getting into that house ? It's built with the precautions against surprise of a

mediaeval fortress. But we'll get in, my lad . . . through the garage. When the lorries return you and I will be driving one of 'em ! "

I stared at him in amaze.

" But how on earth can we ? " I gasped.

Strange smiled again, a smile of pleasant anticipation.

" Oh, I'll show you how when the moment comes," he said. " We'll waylay a lorry, overcome the drivers, adopt their uniforms and enter the garage. We know there must be an entrance into the house direct from the garage as you, yourself, saw the chauffeur already seated in the car as it emerged."

He paused ; and then :

" But we'll have to wait for nightfall."

The thought of such delay was torture to me. I was all eagerness to carry out the plan at once.

" Why ? I think it's a splendid idea. . . . Why can't we . . . ? "

But Strange shook his head.

" As I told you before, young man, over-eagerness has spoilt many a good campaign. If we went in daylight, even in the drivers' uniforms, we should be recognised as soon as we entered the place. In the dark . . . well, we've got a good enough chance of pulling it off."

I was silenced—the fact was so entirely obvious—and with an absolute conviction now that our fates could be left in no better

hands than those of the extraordinary little man seated beside me, I set myself to wait, with all the patience I could muster, for the long hours of day to give way at last to night.

It was a strange day I passed, perhaps the strangest of my life, cooped up within that car, talking softly to Strange, listening avidly to the stories with which he beguiled the hours. And how interesting he was, this man whose acquaintance I had made so dramatically. Even in that time of strain and anxiety there were moments when I forgot utterly the purpose on which we were engaged, so engrossed was I in his conversation.

At last, however, the light began to filter away through the trees, like sand from an hour-glass, and with a sudden leaping of the heart I felt Strange touch my arm.

"Come," he said, "it's dark enough."

From a pocket in the car he removed an automatic and handed it to me.

"Be careful with it—it's loaded," he remarked.

I took it hesitatingly.

"But what about you?" I asked.

For answer Strange tapped his right coat-pocket significantly, then without a word he led the way through the tangled mass of undergrowth which encompassed us. The darkness made our passage still more difficult, but with

never a moment's hesitation Strange proceeded in a direct course to the very edge of the drive down which we had heard the lorries moving.

Once or twice during the day we had heard the sound again, this time returning to the house, and as we crouched there hidden within the bushes the worrying thought came to me that perhaps all the lorries had now returned . . . perhaps we had left it too long—our mission would be fruitless ? I turned to voice my doubts to Strange, but even as I opened my mouth the words were stillborn upon my lips.

Along the drive had come the unmistakable rumbling of a heavy lorry.

Strange clutched my arm. I noticed that he was holding a revolver in his hand, and on the instant I had slipped my own from my pocket. The sound drew appreciably nearer . . . nearer. . . . Peering round the underbrush I could see a great van almost abreast of us, two men seated at the front. They were upon us now . . . passing . . . and then Strange moved.

With a sudden leap he was out in the road, I close upon his heels, and two terrified drivers were staring aghast at the pistols in our hands. Automatically the lorry had stopped, and stepping close up to the drivers, Strange spoke softly. " If you make a sound I shall shoot you both," he said, and there was no mistaking the

deadly menace in his voice. "Get down and take off those uniforms."

"But . . ."

"Get off that seat," said Strange, "and doff the clothes."

There was nothing for the men to do but to comply: they had been taken too much by surprise to attempt resistance. In an amazingly short space of time they were divested of their uniforms, tied up and gagged—Strange had produced the ropes and cloth from his capacious pockets—and Strange and I, resplendent as chauffeurs, carried them both some distance into the undergrowth, where we laid them on the ground. Returning to the lorry we jumped into the front, Strange taking the driver's seat, and proceeded quickly up the road.

As we approached the house we saw that the door of the garage was gradually opening, although there appeared to be no one about, and with our caps drawn down low over our faces we drove into the place.

It was a vast affair, with room for a dozen or more lorries and a number of cars, yet to my surprise and utter relief I could see no man in charge. Quickly we slipped down from our seats and began to walk softly towards the end of the garage. As we did so the place was suddenly flooded with light and a man, whom

I recognised with horror as being my friend the surly gatekeeper, came forward to meet us.

"You're back in good . . ." he started, but his sentence was never completed.

With a sudden leap Strange had sprung at him and borne him to the ground.

"One sound and you're a very dead man," I heard Strange mutter; and then: "Where is the room of Janice Gordon? Is she a prisoner?"

I could have cried out with delight: the idea of obtaining this information from the enemy within had not occurred to me. I heard the man say some words unintelligible to me, and on the instant Strange was at work. From his pocket he produced more rope. In a few minutes the man was trussed up, gagged and helpless; then, with a nod to me to lend him aid, Strange indicated a lorry just before us. In a moment we had lifted the man and placed him inside. Then, with no pause, Strange led the way to the end of the room, through a door, up some steps, along a corridor, up some more steps and along a passage to a room on the right. There he paused, and bending down he knocked on the door gently. We waited a moment . . . two . . . but there was no reply. Strange turned the handle. The door was locked.

Strange turned to me and smiled. Taking some wire from his pocket he bent down to the

keyhole, and his fingers—those long, so useless-looking fingers—moved steadily over the lock. As he worked he murmured softly :

" One has to learn a lot about the methods of the people you chase in order to be successful at the chasing ! Keep a look-out, Dermott, in case anyone comes."

I did so, but during the five minutes that Strange worked upon the door no one troubled our privacy.

At last he stood up.

" Come on," he said.

Pushing open the door he led the way into a room, small and dingy, containing only a bed and a couple of chairs. In one of these, staring with terrified eyes at the door as it opened, was seated Janice, white and haggard, very different from the laughing-faced girl I had kissed when last we parted.

For a few moments after Strange had opened the door and I had, rather roughly in my eagerness, I am afraid, brushed him aside, Janice, who had said no word if she had heard our efforts on the door, stood there staring at me. Then, oblivious of the presence of a third person, I walked quickly over to her, and once again Janice was in my arms and her lips close to my own.

" My dear, my dear," she said, " where on earth . . ."

But I stopped her even before Strange had requested silence. We were in a very dangerous position. We had found her all right, but if we did not want to spoil all the good work which we had hitherto achieved, it was quite essential that we should not be disturbed. She had no need to tell me in words that she had had nothing to do with that message which had entrapped me before—that message which, in point of fact, had been to the detriment of the man who had inspired it, for without it we might never have got on Gordon's track and found again the house of the shuttered windows. But Janice was innocent of all complicity; that was obvious to me, and I believe—Strange has told me since that this was so—to him also.

Yet the torrent of words which, evidently, she had been keeping in the forlorn hope that some day she might see me again could not entirely be stemmed; but she spoke now in a whisper, so softly that only I could catch what she said, and as Strange had shut the door behind us we ran no risk of being overheard.

"When I spoke to you on the telephone, darling," she said, "I spoke to you in all good faith. I did really."

"Oh, I know," I tried to quieten her. "I know."

"I was told that you would come to me.

There were one or two things to discuss, and then you could take me away. That's what my father said, but . . . but . . ."

Evidently the words would not come.

" Don't let's talk about him," I said, " and don't think that for one moment I ever believed you guilty of anything."

" I realised it was a trap afterwards," she cried. " Oh, I could have killed myself. I could have . . ."

Strange interrupted us.

" There's no time to lose," he said. " I'm awfully sorry, miss, but don't let's all commit suicide now. I hate to disturb the words which must be very pleasant indeed to the ear of our young friend here, but there's a time for everything. At the moment the time indisputably has come for us to get you away. You can help us. You know this house ? "

" Yes, yes."

Her eagerness made it clear to both of us that she was entirely on our side, that she wanted to get away. The realisation thrilled me ; deep in my heart I had been worrying lest, perhaps, Janice herself would thwart our plans on her behalf by refusing to leave her father. I smiled with relief.

Strange then took charge of the situation. In a very short time Janice had described to us exactly how to get to a side door in the house

—a secret door, not perceptible from the outside—how to get her away. I was astonished by Strange's persistence on this point, astonished until I realised that he was acting on my behalf. Although singularly inhuman at times this was a definite mark of how human the odd little man could be. Evidently he wanted to get her clear away before making any attempt on what might prove extremely dangerous. But there was a lot that she could tell us, a lot of information which would be of the utmost use. The whole of that house she described to us then, so that after five minutes of conversation Strange and I felt that we could find our way almost anywhere about it, and it was practically certain that there could be but one room which at present contained Robert Ingles, assuming he were a prisoner. That was the room to which Janice referred as her father's study, his office, or the brain room of the building. All other rooms, Janice informed us, were used for the work in hand, saving only that padded room into which I had been taken, which was kept for dangerous cases.

" What work is it ? " asked Strange.

But here Janice could help us no more. Her father had never taken her into his confidence ; she knew nothing about it—nothing at all. She had supposed that he ran some form of business as well as a private mental home.

The story which he had told her was in that sense similar to the story which he had told me. It was only recently, only on my sudden appearance in that house and my investigations which had led to her father's ire, that she realised there was something far more behind it all. In the house itself she had been kept more or less a prisoner ; it was only when she was staying away that she was allowed a free life. She had thought it was because of his patients that her father had denied her the freedom of the house ; but it was obvious now that she believed, that she feared something very different.

Strange made up his mind as soon as she had finished speaking.

" We must get down again," he said, " back to the garage. You will wait for us, Miss Janice, if I may call you so—wait near a car. Have it all ready to start. We will be back with you in a very short time, but "—and his voice suddenly became serious—" if you hear strange sounds, if you learn that things have gone wrong, well then . . . you must clear out yourself. Go straight to Mr. Dermott's flat in London and wait there until to-morrow, and if by then you hear no news, go straight to Scotland Yard and tell them the whole story."

He paused and suddenly looked at her.

" You can drive a car, of course ? "

" Yes," she said.

" Very well, then."

Without another word we all moved quickly from the room, along the passage, down the stairs, along the other passage to the steps leading directly into the garage. Noiselessly Strange pushed open the door and peered in. The place was apparently empty, though still flooded with light, for on our exit a little while before we had not paused to discover the switch.

Strange pointed towards one of the cars—that which stood nearest to the entrance gates, which most fortunately were still wide open. He turned to Janice.

" Jump into that," he said, " and be ready to dash off."

Janice took a step forward towards it . . . hesitated . . . looked back at me . . . and then, turning her back definitely upon the car she turned to Strange.

" No," she said, and there was a ring of decision in her voice which boded ill should Strange oppose her. " No . . . I'm not going to be treated like a child. . . . I'm going to help. . . . I don't know what you're up to, but I can guess it's pretty dangerous. You've got to let me help you ! "

" Don't be ridiculous," Strange snapped. " How could you help ? You'd only. . . ."

Janice stared at him stolidly.

" How could I help ? " she interrupted him imperiously. " Why, by showing you the way about the house, of course, by . . ."

But then something happened which ended the argument for all time. From somewhere in the house there came a scream, a nerve-racking scream, yet one in which there was no hint, no slightest trace of that insanity which had been so devilishly apparent in those others I had heard.

Julian Strange and I looked at each other askance, for we had recognised the voice. That sound had come from the throat of but one man—and that man was Robert Ingles.

Without pausing an instant Strange bolted towards the steps to the passage. The sound had seemed to come from one of the rooms on this floor. Suddenly he stopped and turned.

" Your father's study . . . which is it ? "

Without a word Janice led us to a door on the left. Strange turned the handle and thrust it open. . . . In a moment we were all within staring, horror-stricken, at the sight before us.

I have seen many grim sights in my life ; no one who spent the four years following a certain August in Flanders could have failed to do so, yet never, even in those devilish days, was I so appalled as by the scene that met my eyes as we burst into that room.

It was a long room, fitted up, apparently, as a laboratory, empty of furniture save for a desk, a table and some chairs. These details, of course, I did not note in that first glance : at that moment all my attention was centred upon the tableau before me. For seated within two of the chairs, bound hand and foot with sturdy-looking rope, were two men whom I knew—Robert Ingles and the little tramp.

My glance fell first upon the latter, and as I stared at him my heart turned sick within me ; a cold chill made my blood become as ice. For from the eyes of the little man all sanity had fled . . . that which he most feared had come upon him. His head was lolling forwards stupidly . . . crazily. . . . *The man was mindless.*

And even as I realised this fact, even as, with panic clutching with icy fingers at my heart, I turned to stare at Ingles, I saw that standing before him was a man, a man whose lips were parted in an evil, cruel smile, a man whom I recognised as the father of Janice. He was holding something in his hands, holding it as though about to cast it into the tortured face of Ingles, who, like a cat fascinated by a venomous snake, was staring up at him as though in a trance.

The tableau was set like this as we burst into the room . . . the hand of Gordon was

lowering to thrust that brain-destroying powder into the eyes of Ingles, to banish his mind as had been destroyed that of the man at his side . . . when a shot rang out, and without a sound, without a cry, Gordon pitched forward lifeless upon the floor, the powder still clutched firmly in his hand. Even as he passed over the threshold Julian Strange had acted.

What happened afterwards I can but dimly recollect: the whole affair is blurred in my mind on account of its suddenness and terror. I have a confused memory of myself rushing up to Ingles and releasing him from his bonds; of giving him into the care of Janice and bidding her put him in the car and set off at once for some distance down the drive, there to wait for us.

Then there had come a terrific explosion, and turning quickly I saw that, with the enormous strength that only the mad possess, the tramp had burst through his bonds, seized a beaker of powder that stood upon the table and had thrown this into an assortment of liquids which were ranged in great jars upon the desk.

On the instant there was pandemonium. The room was alive with flames. Janice and Ingles, mercifully, had already gone, but as Strange and I made for the doorway the tramp, laughing foolishly, hurled himself upon

us. There was but one thing to do and Strange did not shirk it. For the second time that night his automatic flashed wickedly . . . and the tramp opposed us no longer.

The fire had spread to the corridor now, was spreading fast over all the house, and it was by the smallest of margins that we managed to attain the garage, and then the open, before the whole of the first floor fell crashing down upon the passage we had just left.

We dashed down towards the car, which was drawn up some way along the drive, and as we ran I could hear a number of frightful explosions rending the air.

"Quick!" gasped Strange, as we ran. "We must cut right away. There's no hope at all for those devils . . . they're in their element now, anyway."

And indeed the whole place was collapsing like a pack of cards in the hands of a mischievous child. Having attained the car and driven in it farther along the drive, I turned and stared behind me, aghast. I would never have believed such a thing to be possible, but Strange's next words explained the matter.

"It's cram full of explosives," he said. "I recognised Gordon as he fell . . . he was known by many names, but one of them was 'Andrew the Anarchist'."

I stared at him in amazement.

" You mean . . . ? "

" That he is—or rather was—the head of one of the most daring and dangerous bands of anarchists the world has ever seen."

In a flash I understood.

" Then that's where they make the bombs ? "

Strange nodded.

" Or, rather, where they *did* make them," he said grimly. " Come on, it's safe for us to go back now, I should think. I don't suppose there's much left to explode. We'd better see if anyone is still alive ! "

And for the next hour or so we, all four of us, worked desperately among the smoking remains to see whether any human being was still alive . . . but without success. Everyone within that shuttered mansion had perished instantaneously as it collapsed to the ground.

It was in an awed silence that at last we set off in the car to my flat in town.

THE FORCING HOUSE CHAPTER VII

JULIAN STRANGE and I came down the stairs and into the open. We turned on to the Embankment.

The scene before us was very peaceful. The Thames flowed gently along beneath the

bridges that spanned the distance ; a barge or two, a stately ship, half a dozen boats moved swiftly over its surface. A thousand sea-gulls perched themselves upon the parapet that edged the water, soliciting with raucous cries alms of bread from the passers-by. One or two couples strolled arm-in-arm along the pavement beneath the budding trees. The sun was shining, spangling the waters into a mimicry of jewels, and as I stared around me I wondered whether it would still have been so peaceful had not Dame Fortune led my steps on that night of blizzard to the lonely house in that straggling wood.

For we had just told our tale to the Commissioner of Scotland Yard and a most important personage. A man who held a high Cabinet post had also been in that room. Julian Strange's sudden recognition when we had burst open the door and seen the man Gordon about to torture and take the life of Robert Ingles had now been fully explained to me, as well as the purpose of that house, as far as could be ascertained from its charred remains. Here it was that one of the most important, one of the most powerful, gangs of anarchists had their headquarters. Here it was that they made constantly and by forced labour the death-dealing ammunition which they were about to use in their nation-wide

attempt to terrorise the normally peaceful inhabitants of this country to their will.

And as I walked along and as these thoughts came into my mind, it occurred to me how little is necessary to cause the downfall even of the most careful and well-laid plans. Had it not been that someone had screamed, had it not been that Janice had rushed into that room not knowing that I was there, had it not been that I had seen her face and looked into her eyes, perhaps I would have been prepared to accept that first warning which I had received, perhaps I would have said: "Well, it's none of my business," and left it alone. And, if I had, what far-reaching consequences might have taken place, what fearful catastrophe might have come about through my omission.

But as it was. . . . I turned to Strange.

"Julian," I said, and as I looked at him, using his Christian name because I liked him and not merely because I was grateful to him, realising how unattractive he was in many ways and yet how superbly attractive in others, the words that I pronounced I really meant: "Julian, what are you doing for the next half-hour?"

"Why, nothing," said the odd little man. "Why, nothing at all. Are you proposing to offer me a drink?"

I laughed.

"Indirectly—yes," I said. "After you have done me a little service. Just round the corner there is a church. Janice is waiting there for me now. I shall want two witnesses: Bob Ingles will be one; d'you think you could be the other?"

He laughed.

"Can an angel fly?" he said. "Congratulations, old man."

I feel as I sit and write these last few words to this amazing tale which happened to me—words which I have been compelled to write since such a sequence of events occurs only to a few men and therefore should be recorded—I feel that those congratulations which Julian Strange offered to me ought, but for the inhibiting silence of an Englishman, have been directed to him.

For without him, without his uncanny skill, his amazing perspicuity, would Janice that morning have become my wife?

THE END